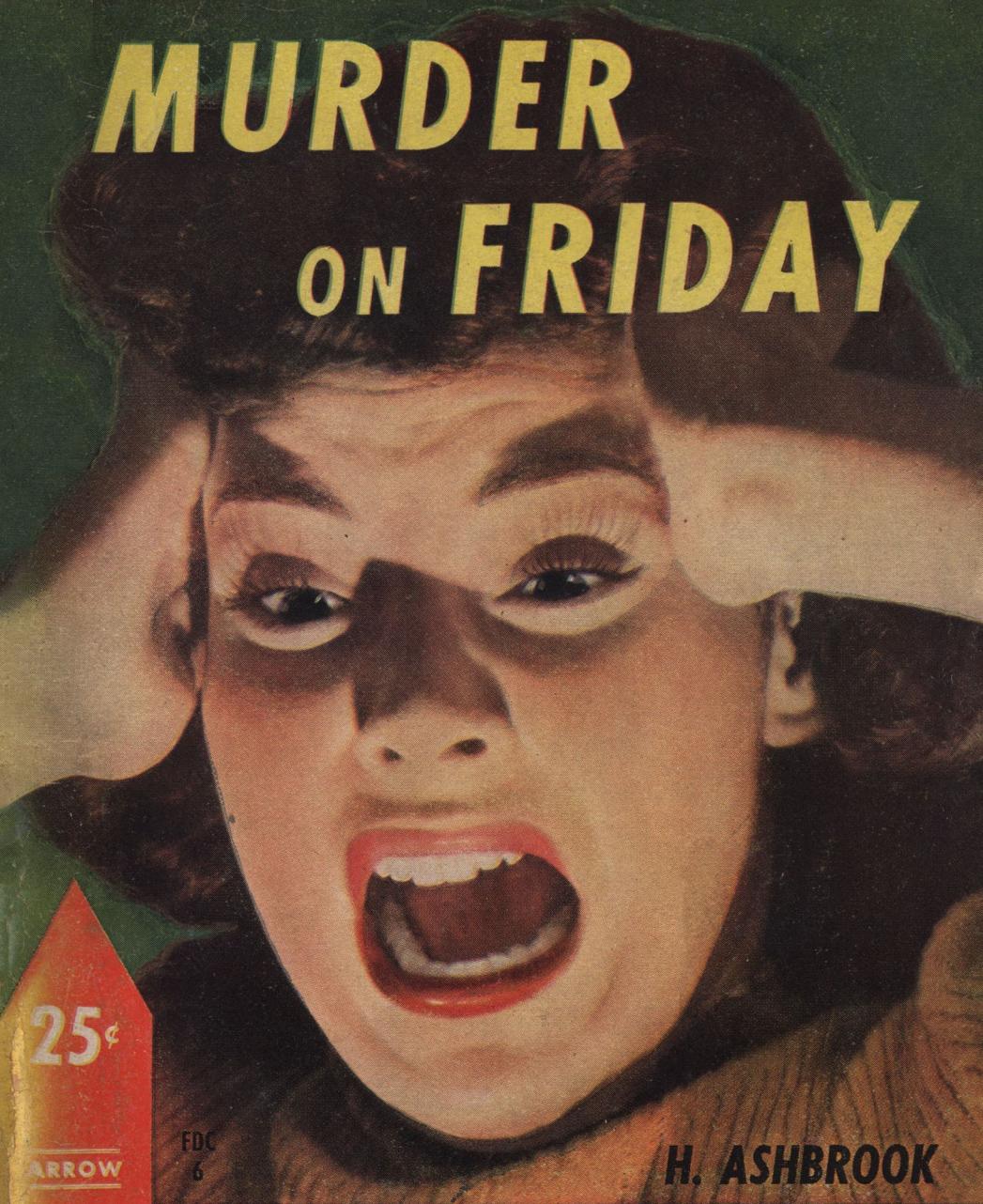


MURDER ON FRIDAY



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H. ASHBROOK

A Complete \$2. Mystery Novel

MURDER ON FRIDAY

by H. ASHBROOK

FOR the first time in his spectacular career, Spike Tracy, ace detective, was baffled. A woman — Lina Lee — had been shot through the head by an old army revolver in the office of Felix Penton, playboy-publisher. Here, it seemed, was the "perfect crime."

There was no lack of evidence. There were too many suspects, too many clues. Not one of those involved had an alibi. And before Spike could even begin to establish a case, there were any number of separate mysteries to be solved, none of which seemed to make sense.

What was the meaning of the purple onion in Lina Lee's luxurious apartment? Why were the account books of the Penton Press taken from the safe, and what did the auditor's check-up reveal? Who was the veiled woman appearing so mysteriously at certain crises in Penton's life? And, most important of all, what did a certain newspaper photograph, yellowed with age, have to do with the case?

These are only a few of the posers which Spike Tracy encounters as he pursues his investigations. "Murder on Friday" calls for his most brilliant deductive powers. And he comes pretty close to failure when he runs up against the blind devotion which Felix Penton inspires in women. . . .

Harriet Ashbrook, the author, is one of the most popular mystery writers in America today. In "Murder on Friday," she surpasses her public's highest expectations.

"This is a fine job of story-telling." — *The Cleveland Press*.
"First rate tough stuff . . . Nice going."

— William Boehnel in *The New York World-Telegram*
"Miss Ashbrook has rung the bell again."

— *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*
"The author writes with zip and bang."

— *The Honolulu Reporter*

This is the 6th

ARROW MYSTERY NOVEL

Cover designed by ROBERT PAULSEN

An ARROW MYSTERY Novel

MURDER ON FRIDAY

by H. ASHBROOK

*author of Murder Comes Back
A Most Immoral Murder
Murder Makes Murder
The Murder of Cecily Thane*

ARROW PUBLISHERS
16 West 46th Street • New York (19)

BENNIE C. HALL, *Editor*

WHO'S WHO IN "MURDER ON FRIDAY"

- SPIKE TRACY**, the inimitable sleuth who professes to be tough—but admits he's a pushover for any couple in love.
- FELIX PENTON**, playboy publisher, a gay cavalier who plays Casanova once too often.
- ANNE PENTON**, Felix' attractive daughter, whom Spike finds hard to resist—even when he suspects her of murder.
- LINA LEE**, Penton's erstwhile secretary, whom nobody liked, but whose murder was hardly expected.
- SAM HESKETH**, Lina's ex-husband, an alumnus of Sing Sing, who carries an ace, along with an emerald earring, up his sleeve.
- STANLEY BISHOP**, a Penton employee, in love with Anne—but frankly out to get Lina.
- VIOLET BRIDENTHAL**, who carries a torch for Felix, but never forgets to remember the great love of her life—herself.
- PHILIP BRIDENTHAL**, wealthy manufacturer, who is Violet's meal-ticket and Felix Penton's not-so-silent partner.
- ROWENA ASCHE**, Felix Penton's ex-secretary. She loves Felix too—and is a glutton for punishment.
- CASSIE FRAMP**, a lass from the open spaces, who operates on the theory that the short-cut to a man's heart is by way of his stomach.
- FREDDY BINGLEY**, precocious office boy and self-appointed G-Man.
- CECILE LaMOTTE**, an ex-showgirl with no future worth mentioning—but, oh, what a past!
- THE VEILED WOMAN**, who always shows up at the psychological moment, bearing strange gifts and further complicating a baffling mystery.

* * *

CHAPTER I

THE Colonel's lady was nervous. Very beautiful in a hard, bright, enameled way, but nervous. Definitely.

"... and so it is my great privilege and honor tonight on the occasion of this annual Memorial Day ball to present on behalf of the Colonel of the Sixty -th National Guard this silver cup to ..." The voice of Colonel Philip Bridenthal's wife came through the microphone to the farthest reaches of the armory, and the captain of the regimental polo team stepped forward to the platform to receive the cup.

In a box in the middle distance of the huge arena a gentleman in evening clothes stiffened and snorted. His name was Anthony P. Harvey, and he had contributed the polo cup, not the Colonel, and now here was this blasted woman mixing things up and ...

"... sorry friends—excuse—I mean ..." The Colonel's lady fumbled and started over again. "I have the privilege tonight of presenting on behalf of Mr. Anthony P. Harvey, one of the honored sponsors of the Regiment, this cup . . ."

The gentleman in the middle distance subsided, his smug complacency restored. On the platform the captain of the polo team retired, carrying the silver cup amid a storm of applause, and the adjutant handed her the rifle and sharpshooting trophy. As she took hold of it with her left hand, the cold metal felt warm by contrast with the icy trembling of her fingers. She wondered if anyone could notice. She wondered if Philip . . .

She stepped toward the footlights and began another precise, formal speech, as another guardsman came forward. She mustn't look at Philip, sitting there with the other officers in the first row. She mustn't. She mustn't seek to read questions or answers in his eyes. Philip's eyes were little and pig-like, and there were two rolls of red, beefy flesh above Philip's collar.

"... on behalf of Mr. Francis R. Huntington ... this trophy ..." That was her voice speaking, she had to tell herself. Thank God it was even. Thank God she had that much control . . . saying polite words learned by rote. And all the time she wanted to scream . . . scream!

But she mustn't scream now. And she mustn't look at Philip. And she must smile and keep on with the little set, polite speeches until all the trophies were gone, and then there would be more dancing and then finally they'd go home . . . and then she could scream and—no, no, not even at home . . . Philip . . . did he know? That was the ques-

tion that was beating itself over and over in her brain.

She looked at him sitting in the front row. Was he just smiling like that as a blind? Tonight when they got home would he . . .

"That's all, Mrs. Bridenthal." It was the voice of the adjutant at her elbow. "That's all." He had to repeat it before she realized that it was over, that the trophies were all given out, the ceremony finished.

She leaned against a chair to steady herself, and her nervous hands sought her throat, tore tiny shreds from the spray of black orchids at her shoulder, twisted a diamond and jade necklace. A crazy, irrelevant thought flashed through her mind. She wondered if anyone suspected that the original diamond and jade, the *real* necklace had long since gone . . . the sapphires and pearls, too . . .

Philip was coming toward her now, mounting the platform . . .

* * *

Cassie Framp surveyed the ice-box leftovers with a practiced eye. A discouraging array it would have been to the average, run-of-delicatessen housewife, but not to Cassie. Her hands moved swiftly, expertly, and when the meal was on the table she called Rowena. But like all supreme cooks, Cassie was full of apologies.

"Seems like it's hard to plan, when there's a three-day holiday," she said as Rowena took her place. "Saturday and Sunday, and then Memorial Day coming on Monday. It's nice for the people in offices that can get away for a long week end, but along about Monday night the ice box gets pretty empty looking. Of course you can always go to the delicatessen, but you pay three prices and the stuff isn't near as good as you get from the regular markets and—"

She broke off and sighed. "I declare, Rowena, I might just as well save my breath. You're not even listening."

"I'm sorry—I oh . . ." Rowena played with her food and sought escape from Cassie's prying eyes by gazing out of the window into the evening dusk.

Cassie at the stove dropped a skillet with a bang. Rowena gave a slight scream, and her arms jerked convulsively. Then she gripped the edge of the table trembling. "Oh—oh . . ."

"I'm sorry, Rowena. I didn't mean to let it fall. You don't need to take on so." She crossed the kitchen to the dining alcove and sat down opposite the other woman. "I declare to goodness, Rowena, I don't know what to make of you. For the last two, three days, half the time you've been acting scared to death, and the other half like a cat that's full o' cream."

But Rowena offered no explanation, and they ate the rest of the meal in silence. Afterward they cleared off the table and washed and wiped the dishes. When they were through, Rowena took a seat at the window where the warm breeze stirred the curtains faintly.

She sat very still. Still, but not quiet. There was about her a tension, a tautness that was more eloquent than actual motion. Even Cassie, whose nerves were cushioned with placid good nature, sensed it.

It was past nine when she finally persuaded Rowena to go to bed. "All right, Cassie, only I've got to have something to sleep—I've got to . . ." The tension broke in sudden desperation.

Cassie was soothing. "You will, honey, don't worry. I'll give you sodium amytol, double dose. You don't suppose I want you wandering around all hours like you did Friday, do you? My, but you gave me a scare."

When at last Rowena was sleeping with the dead heaviness of the drugged, Cassie put on a light coat and went out for a walk. There was an anxious frown between her eyes as she strolled west along Eighty-fifth Street. At Lexington she paused and watched the crowds pouring out of the subway, homeward bound after the Memorial Day week end. . . .

* * *

The girl was very gay and laughing, the center of attention at the long table that flanked the dance floor of the Blue Rabbit. Her hair was a golden aureole of fine-spun curls, and her skin had all the delicacy of wild roses, and her mouth invited kissing.

Several of the men of the crowd responded to the invitation. "On your birthday, don't be stingy," one of them admonished as he claimed his share. There was champagne and laughter, and everyone was very merry. The girl especially.

And then suddenly in the midst of it she had to leave, taking with her one of the young men. There were cries of protest.

"But we're supposed to go on to the Keenes'. They're having a cocktail party," she cried gaily, but her voice was a little shrill. "And after that we're due at the Stork Club, and after that—who knows? I'm not twenty-one every day of the year, and we're making a night of it. Come on," and she hooked her arm through that of the young man at her side.

But outside when their taxi had slid away from the curb and turned north on Fifth Avenue, the laughter and gaiety were gone, and

she clung to the man beside her, her hands cold and trembling although the night was warm. He put his arm around her and held her close.

"Was I gay? Was I gay enough?"

"You were wonderful," he told her.

"But I can't go on: I can't." There was an edge of hysteria to her voice.

"But we must. The Keenes—"

"I can't go to the Keenes. I can't stand any more. Take me home."

"All right. Quiet now. Steady." He leaned forward and gave the man at the wheel a new address.

She was trembling violently now, and he tightened the firm hold of his arm and took her two icy hands in his.

"I think I'm going crazy. I'm—"

"Hush! You mustn't give way here. The driver . . ."

The taxi was stopped now, held up by a red traffic light. The girl pressed her quivering mouth against his shoulder to keep back the rising flood of hysteria.

"But I want to scream and burst into senseless gibberish. I want to—"

The door of the cab opened, and a man climbed in and with great deliberation sat down on one of the small folding seats.

"Hey, what's this? This cab's taken."

The intruder nodded in solemn agreement. "'Course. That's why I'm here. Driver"—he turned toward the front just as the light changed to green—"drive on." The jerk of the start nearly upset him.

"Look here, you can't—"

"Oh yes, I can. I have already." There was a thickness to his voice, a slight wavering of his posture. The man was drunk. But not objectionably so. Perhaps . . . Maybe it was a fortuitous intrusion. He was so solemn and so outrageous in his audacity that for the moment the girl had ceased trembling to stare at him.

A personable-looking fellow, tall and fair haired, somewhere in the thirties probably. He returned her gaze and leaned forward with the easy confidence of the inebriated.

"Tell me something," he said. "Are you—I mean you two—are you a loving and devoted couple?"

The girl laughed nervously, but more naturally.

"Because," the drunken young man went on, "because if you're

not, I'll just have to leave. Just have to pick up my tents and silently steal away. Just have to be an Arab."

The young man with his arm around the girl smiled. "Look, brother, we wouldn't want you to be an Arab, but we would like to know what it's all about."

"Well, it's like this." He leaned forward still more confidentially as if surrounded by hostile spies. "It's a bet." He considered this for a moment and then amended his own statement. "No, no, not a bet. It's one of those games. You know."

"No, we don't know." The young man could feel the tenseness of the girl in his arms ease a bit. This drunken guy was a godsend. Lead him on. "What game?"

"At a party. Crazy game where you have to go out and do something crazy like—like stealing an elephant at the Bronx zoo—or finding a man with a long white beard and—and braiding it—you know—in pigtails, or—or like me."

"Yeah, what about you? You've been to a crazy party and you're playing a crazy game and you've been given something crazy to do. Such as?"

"Such as—as finding a loving and devoted couple in a cab—you're a loving and devoted couple aren't you? Tell me you are, or I can't stay. Say you are because . . ." It looked as if the drunk were about to break down into tears, so the young man hastened assurance.

"Yes, yes. Set your little heart at rest on that score. We're the most loving and devoted couple in North America."

The drunk heaved a sigh of relief and went on. "So now I have to ride home with you without—without getting thrown out on my ear or arrested. So please don't . . ." His voice wavered, and his hands fumbled with the other folding seat. When he had it in place, he swung his long legs up and managed to compress his not inconsiderable length in a fairly compact fashion so that he was lying across the two seats.

"And now," he said as he took off his high silk hat and laid it over his face, "don't wake me till we get home. So tired—going to sleep—don't . . ." He settled comfortably into a doze.

The man and the girl on the back seat looked at each other and laughed helplessly. "What'll we do with him?"

They still hadn't decided when the cab drew up in front of an old-fashioned brownstone front on East Eighty-fifth Street.

"Maybe," the young man suggested, "we could will him to the taxi driver."

"Oh no you don't, brother." The man at the wheel was emphatic. "I ain't got time to play nurse girl to no drunk."

The drunk opened his eyes and sat up slowly. Then he grinned with a satisfied air as if he'd really done something smart. "We're home—and you didn't throw me out—or have me arrested." He beamed. "You're wonderful!" He rose unsteadily and climbed out of the cab. "Come on."

"Where to?"

"Why we'll all go in and have a drink."

"Oh, no, we'll go in, but you're staying out here."

"Alone?"

"Unless you can pick up someone else."

"But—but you're breaking my heart."

"Sorry but—you'd better run along."

"But I can't run. I'm . . ." He peered around to be sure no one was listening, and again assumed a confidential air. "I'm drunk."

"Aw, don't kid us like that."

"Yeah, drunker'n hell."

"Well is that any reason for the three of you to be blocking the sidewalk so's respectable people—"

"Cassie!" The girl's voice cut through the good-natured protest as she recognized the woman who had approached.

"Yes, my dear, it's me, and what are you two doing out here arguing with a drunk?"

"We picked him up."

"No, he picked us up," and the young man related the story of the intruder. "And now we don't know what to do with him."

"Send him home."

"He won't go."

"All right, let him stay here on the street."

"He won't stay."

Cassie sighed. "Look," she said turning to the drunk, "where's your home?"

"I—I haven't got any. I'm an orphan," he added woefully.

"Well then, where do you live?"

"I won't tell. I won't give my right name. I won't—"

The young man interposed an idea. "Couldn't we just hail another

taxi and put him into it, and give the driver some money and tell him—”

“Money?” the drunk interrupted brightly. “Anyone need money?” He drew a wallet from his pocket and extracted a bill. Other bills fluttered to the sidewalk. “Here, brother, always glad to help a pal. Always . . .”

The young man looked at the fifty-dollar bill that had been pressed upon him. Cassie stooped and gathered up five more that lay on the sidewalk. For a moment she hesitated. Then she boldly took the wallet from the drunk and counted the money, including the bill which the young man had held.

“Golly! Six hundred and forty-two dollars.”

“It’s all yours, sister,” the drunk assured her generously.

Cassie looked at him thoughtfully. “Yes, that’s just the trouble. It’s all mine or all anybody else’s you meet up with.” She turned to the young man and the girl. “We can’t let him run loose, drunk and with all this money on him.”

“But what’ll—”

“I’ll take him,” she said decisively. “You help me get him upstairs, and he can sleep it off on the couch in the front room.”

“But Cassie!”

“Tomorrow morning he’ll be sobered up, and like as not he’ll leave me twenty million dollars in his will when he dies. Come on.”

The four of them crossed the street to the apartment building opposite and guided the drunken footsteps through the lobby and up to the third-floor apartment.

“Be quiet,” Cassie said as she opened the door. “I don’t want to wake Rowena. Here now, my lad . . .” She guided the drunk to the davenport.

He stretched out his long legs and looked up into Cassie’s eyes. “Angel!” he murmured gratefully.

All three of them sighed with relief.

“Oh, Cassie dear, you’re such a comfort,” the girl said.

“He thinks so, anyway.” She laughed as she nodded toward the drunk. Then she sobered as she eyed the two of them carefully. “Looks like you two could do with a bit of comforting yourselves. You’re both as gloomy as owls. And this your twenty-first birthday. What did you get?”

The girl hesitated. Then her hand sought her throat encircled with a necklace. Emeralds and old Italian gold. Cassie bent closer.

"My, ain't it pretty. Is it real?"

"Of course. They were my mother's. The ones I was telling you about."

"Oh them. But where's the earrings you said went with 'em?"

"They—oh, I didn't wear them."

"Lemme—lemme see, too." The drunk sat up and peered at the girl. His eyes caught the glint of the light reflected from the jewels. "Oooo, pretty, pretty!" And he sank back again to the couch and closed his eyes. . . .

* * *

Mrs. Anton Paskivi was singing. Her voice was low and monotonous and tuneless, but nevertheless it expressed what Mrs. Paskivi was feeling—the still pleasant savor of a three-day holiday, mingled with a certain weary resignation at her return to a drab world of mops and pails and office floors.

She filled her pail from the tap in the hall and fumbled among her keys until she found the one that fitted the reception room of the Penton Press. Inside it was dark, but Mrs. Paskivi knew just where to find the switch.

When she had flooded the room with light, she crossed it and went through the door leading into the main office. She went around pulling on lights. She liked lots of light. When you had to do your work all in the early hours of the morning when everything was dark outside, it was nice to have plenty of lights going inside. Mrs. Paskivi always went around and turned on all the lights before she started to work with her scrub pail and brush. She was turning them on now. In the main office—in the cashier's cage—in the smaller of the two private offices—in the larger . . .

Mrs. Paskivi paused. She had turned the switch in the larger of the two private offices and had started across the room to open the window. As she flanked one of the two mahogany desks, she halted. At first she just stared, letting what she saw sink in, register at last in her slow-moving consciousness.

There—on the floor—half crumpled under the desk—a woman—a dead woman!

Mrs. Paskivi ran shrieking from the office, crying out for the night watchman.

CHAPTER II

MR. SPIKE TRACY, the insouciant younger brother of the district attorney of New York County, opened his eyes, looked around, and wondered where he was.

It was a pleasant room, unpretentious but comfortable, with the end-of-May sunshine coming in through a south window. But he'd never seen it before in his life.

He sat up on the edge of the davenport and stretched and yawned. His head felt heavy, and his tongue was furry. That was it. He was drunk last night. And now . . . Oh well, he'd wakened up in lots worse places than this after an all-night bat. He sank back onto the davenport and reached for his cigarette case.

He was smoking complacently when a woman came in quietly, so quietly that he didn't know she was there until she was standing before him. He looked at her for a moment and neither of them spoke. Then he said, "Hello," and she said, "Hello," and she grinned.

She took a seat and looked him over, and he looked her over. Nice and comfortable-looking, she was. Graying hair. Somewhere along in her fifties, probably. Nice clear skin with a little black mole just above the left-hand corner of her mouth. Must have been pretty once. Nice eyes, brown and full of kindness and chuckles. He liked her.

"Who are you?"

"My name's Cassie Framp."

"Where am I?"

"My apartment on East Eighty-fifth Street."

"How'd I get here?"

As she related the previous night's encounter, the vague, general outlines returned to him. The man and the girl in the taxi, the argument on the sidewalk, and then the girl again. Pretty girl. Pretty as hell, with an emerald necklace she got for her birthday. He remembered now.

"You're a honey," he said. "Why didn't you just frisk me and leave me lay in the gutter?"

"There's a city ordinance against littering up the streets. How's your head?"

"Terrible."

"You need some food. It'll sop up some of the liquor that's still in you."

"Yeah, I know. Can I use your telephone?"

She nodded, and he picked up the receiver from its place on a small table beside the davenport. In a few minutes he had a number.

"Pug?"

"Yeah." She could hear the voice that came over the wire.

"This is me. I wasn't home last night."

"I know. Where was you?"

"I spent the night with a woman."

"You would."

"I need some clothes."

"O. K. Where'll I bring 'em."

He gave the address and hung up.

"Might just as well get things straight now," Cassie said. "You spent the night with two women."

"You mean I was seeing double?"

"I mean me and a friend of mine have this apartment together. She's gone to work over an hour ago. Who's Pug?"

"Pug? Well, it's this way. Pug was a bantam weight fighter who took a lot of punishment. He's got a broken nose and a bent left ear. Now he's too old. Must be all of forty-five. So he's a combination of *valet de chambre*, cook, confidant, severest critic, and companion in general hell raising."

By the time Pug arrived with a suit of clothes to replace the crumpled white tie and tails that Spike was wearing, Cassie Framp had things going in the kitchen. At first there had been an argument.

"Don't think I'm not grateful for your night's hospitality," Spike had explained. "But I really don't want to trespass further on your good nature. Pug and I will go out to a restaurant."

"You'll do no such thing. Get into the bathroom and give yourself a cold shower, and by the time your pal gets here breakfast will be ready. Do as I say, now. Git!"

Spike got.

Cassie had eaten earlier in the morning, but she sat down with a cup of coffee to keep the two men company.

"If there ain't enough—or you want some more, just—"

"Enough! More! Lady!" Spike held up a hand in protest. "Do you know how much I've had already?"

"No. I never was good at higher mathematics."

The two men leaned back and lit cigarettes and surveyed the havoc they had wrought. There had been iced orange juice and iced tomato

juice. There had been coffee, fragrant and hot, and bacon, crinkled and crisp, and pancakes that floated lightly on pools of real maple syrup and fresh butter.

There had been . . . But now it was a shambles and the two men were groaning slightly with the pleasures of repletion. Cassie was beaming.

"I was raised on a farm, and I do like to see men eat. My first husband, Mr. Framp, was a good eater too."

"Who's your second husband?" Pug demanded.

"Haven't got him yet."

"Anybody particular in mind?"

"No. Want to get in the waiting line?"

Pug shook his head, but regretfully. "I'd like to, lady, but I wouldn't live long enough to get to first base. For anybody who can cook like you, the line 'ud reach from here to Hong Kong."

It was not until they each had finished their third cigarette that Pug remembered something. "Oh yeah," he said in sudden recollection. "Herschman called you twice this morning."

"What's he want?"

"You. Right away."

"O. K. Cassie darling, mind if I take one more little nap on your davenport?"

* * *

"Well," said Inspector Herschman, chief of the Homicide Squad, "you certainly took your time."

"It's only twelve o'clock."

"Only!" He snorted. "You know how long I'm in here? Since four this morning."

"You must like it here. What's the name of this joint, anyway?"

"Penton Press. It's a book publishing concern."

"Tch, tch, Inspector. Going literary on us!"

"Shut up and listen to what I have to say. I've got everyone lined up, and all you have to do is put 'em through the works and find out who did the job."

"What job?"

"This job—here—a dame's been murdered."

Spike yawned. "So what?"

The Inspector sighed heavily. "Look, you're a detective, aren't you?"

"Sometimes. Only I don't get paid."

"All right, all right. If that's all that's eating you, I'll put you on the payroll. All I'm asking is that you get busy on this case."

"Inspector, you know I have a soul above money. It's just that I don't wanna."

"Listen." Herschman began to perspire, and he tried a new tack. "This is a swell case. You'll love it. There's a beautiful dame in it, and you know how you are about beau—"

"Can she cook?"

"Cook? How should I know, and what difference does it make?"

"Well, I tell you it's like this, Inspector. I'm getting old. My heart warms to a woman who can cook. A perfect pancake stirs me more than the hot breath of passion."

Herschman looked puzzled and exasperated. "What's come over you?"

"A new woman has come into my life."

"Oh my God!"

"Now, now, this one's different."

"Yeah, I know. Each new one always is."

"This one's fifty-two, and sort of plump and comfortable-looking, and she has invited me up to dinner any night or every night and promised something different each time. She's going to make roast Long Island duckling with applesauce, and sirloin steak with French fried potatoes and—"

"Stop it! All this talk of food's making me hungry. Let's go out to eat, and over lunch I'll give you the main outlines of the case."

"What case?"

"This one. The one you're going to handle."

"I never said so."

"Now look, Spike, I—"

The Inspector was interrupted in his last desperate pleas by a uniformed patrolman. "Miss Penton wants to know if the people in the room across the hall can go out to lunch now."

"Tell her—" He broke off, and a calculating look came into his eyes. "Ask her if she will come here for a moment."

In less than a moment she was there, standing before the inspector, a slight, fair-haired girl. "I'll have food sent up, Miss Penton," the Inspector said. "I'd like to keep the people there until after Mr. Tracy here has had a chance to talk to them." He indicated Spike, and for the first time she turned to look at the other man.

"Oh—" she said. "Oh yes."

When she was gone, Spike turned to the inspector. "Who's she?"

"Anne Penton, daughter of Felix Penton, the president of Penton Press. Now will you—"

"O. K., O. K."

"I thought you would after you saw that dame."

Spike grinned. "She and I are old friends."

"What do you mean?"

"Come on out to lunch, and I'll tell you."

And through an alcoholic haze of recollection Spike reconstructed the adventure of the previous night.

"And," he concluded, "stretch the long arm of coincidence from here to hell and back again because the girl in the taxi is none other than Miss Anne Penton."

On their way back to the Penton Press from lunch, they stopped at the morgue.

"A hot-looking wench," Spike commented as they left a few minutes later. "A bit Carmen-ish. Somewhere in her thirties, I'd say, although it's always dangerous to speculate about a woman's age. What's her name?"

"Lina Lee. She was secretary for the last three years to Felix Penton, president of the company."

"What was she before that?"

"Dunno yet. Haven't been able to find out much about her, except that she seems to have bossed the place and wasn't any too popular with the staff."

"What does the Medical Examiner say?"

"Shot straight through the heart at a distance of about three feet with a .38."

"Any trace of the gun found?"

"No, but Parry, the ballistic expert, says it looks like it might have been a certain type of revolver used in the army during the World War."

"When did it happen?"

"The M. E. says it's hard to tell. Two, three days ago, but he refuses to be more exact. The building superintendent—but you'll get all that when you start putting the staff through the works. I had 'em held in a vacant office across the hall."

Back at the office of the Penton Press, Spike began drawing things on paper.

"What are you doing?" Herschman snapped impatiently.

"Drawing a picture of X."

"X what?"

"Come, come, Inspector. You know very well that X always marks the spot," and he handed over a rough outline of the layout of the fourth-floor offices of the Penton Press. "Is that correct?"

Herschman looked it over and nodded.

"O. K., then let's get going."

They had the building superintendent in first.

"It was about five-fifteen last Friday afternoon," he said, "and I was getting ready to go home early on account of the holiday, and she calls me on the telephone."

"You mean Miss Lee called you?"

"Yeah. Miss Lee. She says the light bulbs in Mr. Penton's office were burned out, both of them, and to put new ones in before Tuesday morning."

"How'd she sound—angry, upset, frightened, or what?"

"No, nothing out of the ordinary. Just snapping out orders like she usually did."

Spike stepped to the door of Felix Penton's private office and glanced at the lights. There was a cluster of empty sockets in a ceiling fixture.

"Mr. Penton didn't like overhead lights," the superintendent explained. "The only lights in the room were those on the two desk lamps. They work from this switch here beside the door."

Spike stepped to the switch and carefully, with the merest edge of his fingernail, flipped it. A light flashed on in the lamp on Felix Penton's desk.

"So when did you put it in?" Spike asked.

"I didn't. She says before Tuesday, and I was in a hurry to get home Friday night so I thought I'd wait until this morning."

"Maybe some of your staff . . ."

"No. I asked 'em. All of 'em."

There were three elevator men to be interviewed. The first two worked on the day shift, and had been on duty the previous Friday afternoon when the building had disgorged the holiday-bound workers.

"No sir, I couldn't remember just when everybody left this floor," one of them said. "Everybody was crowding out at once, and from five o'clock on my car was crammed full every trip. Night before a holiday week end, you know, everybody wants to get away early."

"Anybody get off at this floor?" Spike asked.

"I wouldn't know. In out-going rush hours I only stop going down.

Anyone coming up has to use Charlie's car."

But Charlie's memory too was addled by the Friday night crush. He couldn't remember anyone in particular going up to or coming down from the fourth floor.

"And the Penton Press is the only office on this floor?"

"Yes, sir. There's another one across the hall, but it's been vacant almost a year."

The night operator was more satisfactory. He had his record with him. "You see," he explained, "I come on at seven, and after that anyone that goes up or down by the elevator has to sign the record. Put down their name and address and what time they come in and what time they go out and what floor they get off at."

He produced the record. Spike scanned it carefully and made a few notes: *Stanley Bishop—in 7:30 . . . Helen Martin—in 8:40 . . . Felix Penton—in 9:10 . . . Helen Martin—out 9:25.*

"Who's Stanley Bishop?"

"Manufacturing man," Herschman put in. "Has charge of the actual making of the books, manages all the business with printers, binders, and people like that."

Spike showed his notes to the elevator operator. "On Friday night, did Stanley Bishop and Felix Penton stay here all night?"

"Oh, I wouldn't say that, sir. Mr. Bishop, he comes back right often to work here at night. Usually rides up, and when he gets through he walks down. When they walk down, I don't have any record of when they leave. After seven o'clock nobody can get in the front door without they press the night bell on the outside of the building and call me, but if they're inside they can get out without calling me."

"I see. So that Mr. Penton and Mr. Bishop could have left without your knowing, if they walked down."

"Yes, sir."

"But this Helen Martin didn't walk down. She rode. Know who she was?"

"No, sir. Pretty nifty-looking blonde, though, whoever she was. All done up in evening dress with flowers and things."

There was no record of anyone having ridden to the fourth floor of the Penton Press on Saturday, Sunday, or Monday.

The only other entrance possible was through the service elevator at the rear. But there they drew a blank. The night watchman in charge of the service elevator and the rear entrance to the building was having his vacation. He had been on duty Friday, Saturday, and Sunday nights, and had left Monday. No one knew where he lived, and no one knew where he'd gone, and he wouldn't be back for two weeks.

From Mrs. Anton Paskivi they extracted as coherent a statement as possible under the circumstances, for Mrs. Paskivi was still scared. "And I just go in through the door there and I snap on the light switch, and the lights go on and I'm going to open the window—and then—I saw her...."

She could go no further, but it was far enough to bring a spark of interest to Spike's eyes. "She snapped on the light switch," he pointed out to Herschman when she had gone, "and the light went on. But at five-fifteen Friday night Lina Lee was complaining to the super that both bulbs in this room were dead. Some time between five-fifteen Friday and four a.m. Tuesday somebody put a light bulb in the desk lamp on Lina Lee's desk. I think—"

He broke off and darted into Penton's office. Very carefully, using his handkerchief, he removed the bulb in question. "Exhibit A—maybe. I think we'd better see if there are any fingerprints of interest on that," and he turned it over to Herschman.

Then he stood in the center of the small office and looked around him. "You say nothing has been touched since the removal of the body?"

"Absolutely nothing—except that."

"That" was a round cardboard carton such as drugstores use, and it was standing on one corner of Lina Lee's desk. It contained what had once been a chocolate milk concoction. Spike sniffed it gingerly. "Pretty sour."

"Yeah. It hadn't been opened until I opened it myself this morning."

"Murder on the brink of a milk shake. If we could find out when it was delivered, it might help with that ticklish problem of the time that the Medical Examiner is so uncertain about."

"How so?"

"Well, in weather like this, no one orders a milk shake and lets it sit around for long. But this dame did. Probably because shortly after it was delivered, and before she had a chance to open it up and drink it, someone shot her. Let's not preserve this officially as an exhibit. It stinks. We'll just keep it in mind."

He turned his attention next to the typewriter still open on the secretary's desk. He twisted the roller, and a bit of white paper with a jagged edge slid out. A piece of carbon and a second sheet followed. He picked up the three bits of paper and handed them over to the Inspector. "Exhibit B—maybe. I wouldn't know yet."

The second drawer of the desk was partly open. He drew from it a woman's handbag of handsome seal leather with "L.L." in metal decorating the flap.

"Exhibit C—maybe," he said and started to go through it methodi-

cally. "Funny," he said. "No keys. Everybody has to have keys. Keys to their office, keys to their apartment, keys to—Well, you know, keys. And this dame didn't have any—none at all."

"Maybe someone swiped 'em."

"Maybe. But why not swipe the cash, too? She's got about sixty dollars here in bills." He stuffed the money back into an inner purse and drew out a letter. There was no envelope. Just the letter. He looked at the paper on which it was written, and his eyebrows went up. "The plot thickens. Looky."

Herschman peered closer. The letter was written on the stationery used for correspondence by prisoners in Sing Sing. At the bottom there was a name and a number. "What's it say?" he demanded.

"It's dated Monday, May 9. That would be three weeks ago today. It says:

'Dear Lina—I've got bad news for you. I'm getting out next week. I got three years off for good behavior. I'll be seeing you, Babe, and we'll have a lot to talk over. Met an interesting guy up here. Named Manny. Remember him? Well, you'll be sorry to know he died eight months ago. We got real friendly. He told me a lot about himself—and you. I'm wise to a lot of things I wasn't wise to ten years ago. Well, Babe, as I said before, I'll be seeing you and how. Love (Ha-ha!) —Sam'."

Spike handed the letter over to the Inspector. "Exhibit D, or I don't know one when I see one. Have someone get in touch with Sing Sing and find out who 'Sam'—number so-and-so—is, what's his record, where he is, and bring him around."

He took another brief survey of Felix Penton's office and then went into the main office. Herschman summoned him to a desk well forward toward the reception room. "What do you make of this?" he asked.

Spike looked at the floor near the desk. There were cigarette butts, five of them, and each one with the telltale ring of rouge which marks the woman smoker. He picked up one of them gingerly and sniffed. "Tobacco and perfume. Gosh, how some dames drown themselves in the stinking stuff!"

He bent closer, picked up a few wilted, discolored shreds. These too he sniffed. "Freesias. Someone's been tearing pieces off a bunch of fresh freesias."

"And look at these," Herschman said and drew a piece of tissue paper from his pocket. He smoothed it out and revealed two small rhinestones—one red and one green. "Found 'em about over here." He indicated a spot not far from the leg of the desk. "What do you make of it?"

"Ask me something hard. There's been a woman sitting in this chair here by the desk, a woman who uses some kind of strong per-

fume. She smoked five cigarettes, and from a bouquet of freesias that she was wearing probably, she tore out little bits and scattered them on the floor. And from somewhere about her — necklace, bracelets, brooch, or something of the sort — she dropped two rhinestones."

"Yeah. That's the way I figured it. The question is, who was it? The girls on the staff aren't allowed to smoke in the office."

"Maybe it's this Helen Martin. The elevator man said she was 'all done up in evening dress with flowers and things.' Yeah," and he nodded approvingly at his own deduction. "I think it must have been Helen. Who is she anyway? Another little willing worker of Penton Press come back at night to work overtime?"

Herschman shook his head. "No. She isn't employed here. No one on the staff ever heard of her."

"Oh well, suppose you call her up and tell her to come up and see us some time—some time pretty damn quick. Say within the next half hour."

Herschman laughed. "As if I hadn't already thought of that."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that the address she gave on West Thirty-fourth Street, the one she wrote down on the elevator operator's record, is a phony. There isn't any such address. The numbers going west don't run that high—unless she means she lives in the middle of the Hudson River."

"Tch, tch! Looks like Helen's trying to get foxy with us—giving a phony address. Trying to act like a 'mystery woman' in a detective story. Well, never mind, we'll catch up with her just the same. After all, the record shows that both Penton and Stanley Bishop were here the same time she was. Get hold of them and—"

"If I only could," Herschman interrupted.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean the Missing Persons Bureau are handling that end of the case. Felix Penton has disappeared. So has Stanley Bishop."

CHAPTER III

ALTHOUGH Freddie Bingley was all of sixteen, the red blood of a Junior G-man still coursed through his veins. He resented, therefore, the manner in which the New York Police Department was treating him. Its minions failed to realize that in spirit at least he was a potential collaborator. They were treating him like an office boy! And, since that is precisely what he was, his resentment only increased.

It had started that morning when he had first stepped off the elevator onto the fourth floor with the Penton Press mail under his arm. There had been a cop at the door who had confiscated the mail,

addressed him as "Hey, you," and shooed him into the vacant office across the hall.

The rest of the staff had subsequently been shooed in, too, and held "practically incommunicado." Freddie knew the right terminology, and he was indignant. He was still more indignant when he was sent down to the drugstore on the ground floor for sandwiches and coffee for lunch. And without even a cop along with him. Just as if he wasn't good enough to be a suspect like all the rest of them! Freddie's spirits boiled with the shame and humiliation of it all.

"They're going about it the wrong way," he confided to Miss Asche, the office manager. "What they oughta do is put us all in the regular police line-up, take our fingerprints, mug the lot of us, and—"

Freddie, hush—and go down and get some more sugar." He had been speaking to Miss Asche, but it was Miss Penton who interrupted. And of course since she was the boss's daughter . . .

* * *

In the office across the hall Spike was going over a list of Penton Press employees. "Not a large staff," he remarked.

"No. I don't think the business is doing so good." The Inspector was reading through the morning's mail that had been confiscated from Freddie Bingley, and making a tabulation. "There's more people writing in and asking for books free—reviewers and lecturers and people like that—than are ordering them."

"Yeah," Spike said, "I understand that's what's the trouble with the book business. That, and being ruffined."

"What do you mean?"

I mean every bright young college lad with inherited dough behind him likes to set up a publishing house. Or else it's hard-boiled businessmen who've already made fortunes in something vulgar like bonds or pile remedies or peanut butter and pickles, and they're looking around for something to lend 'em social prestige. So they start a publishing house. It's so ruffined. Which is Felix Penton?"

"Dunno yet. Certainly not a college boy, or he wouldn't have a daughter that old. He's the son of old Josiah Penton who made wads of dough in real estate in the twenties, and died about two years back. But I don't think it's the old man's money in this business. Old Josiah was pretty hard hit by the '29 crash."

"How do you fix the time of Felix Penton's disappearance?"

"Saturday afternoon he took his car out of the garage where he keeps it. And that's the last that anyone has seen of him."

"How about Bishop?"

"He skipped out some time early this morning. He lives in a rooming house down on Ninth Street. His landlady saw him yesterday, and his bed was slept in last night."

"Got pictures of either one of them?"

"Yeah. I sent them down to the Missing Persons Bureau this morning, and they're having enlargements made of Penton and Bishop and circulating them in the usual way."

Spike frowned. "I wish I could be two places at once."

"Such as?"

"Here—and apartment hunting. I'd like a look at Penton's apartment, Lina Lee's, and Stanley Bishop's room. At the same time we ought to get on with this." He indicated the list of Penton Press employees.

"Yeah. These people first, though. I can't hold them much longer and the apartments will wait. I've got men posted at all three places."

"O. K. Let's have the small fry first."

Freddie Bingley, much to his growing indignation, was classed among the small fry. He tried valiantly to live it down.

"Look, Chief, I gotta theory." He was addressing Spike. "Suppose this Jane, Miss Lee's mixed up with a gang. Say an international counterfeiting gang, or maybe a dope peddling ring. Or maybe she's one of those 'kiss o' death' dames like they had in that insurance murder mob down to Philadelphia, and the mob's afraid she's gonna rat and—"

"Spike really hated to interrupt. "Look, Freddie, maybe all you say is true, but would you mind just answering a few questions, and for the time being let it go at that?"

Freddie lapsed into sullen silence. This guy was no better than the rest of those mugs who'd been shoving him around.

"When was the last time you saw Miss Lee?"

"Friday night."

"What time?"

"Overtime," he growled. "She was always keepin' me here late."

"And you were kept late Friday night?"

"Yeah. Everybody was gone, but she says she's stayin' a while to work and I have to go down to the drugstore and get her a chocolate malted."

"And did you?"

"Yeah, I went."

"And when you came back?"

"She was telephonin', raisin' hell with somebody like she usually was. I think it was the super. She was sayin' something about light bulbs. I give her the chocolate malted and then I left."

"What time?"

"Oh, five-fifteen, five-thirty. Somewhere around there."

"Did you lock the door after you?"

"No. She was still here workin' back in Mr. Penton's office, and the office rule is last one out locks the door."

Spike tried to dismiss him, but Freddie made one last desperate stand. "Maybe it ain't a mob, Chief. Maybe—" He broke off, looked about cautiously to make sure that no one but the dicks would hear him. His eyes narrowed. "Here's a hot tip for you. When I went down to get that chocolate malted, there was a—" He paused to make it more impressive. "A veiled woman in the lobby waiting for the elevator."

Spike tried to suppress a grin, and the Inspector looked impatient.

"A veiled woman—you know, all in black like an Italian goin' to a funeral. A veiled woman." He repeated it, drawing out each syllable. "Maybe it's a crime o' passion. One dame shootin' another on account there's a man they're both finaglin' with. And so—"

It was hard to get rid of Freddie, but Spike had to do it.

The other small fry were a miscellaneous assortment of young girls, torn between apprehension and nervous giggles, and the sum total of their evidence was that they all left as soon as they could get away on Friday night. Yes, Miss Lee was here when they left. No, nobody else. Just Miss Lee and Freddie.

"So Freddie was the last one we know of to see her alive," Spike pointed out to Herschman. "That should please him mightily. But I wouldn't tell him because it might precipitate another theory. Also he delivered the choclate malted milk around five-fifteen or five-thirty. Which might indicate that she was killed shortly thereafter."

"Yeah. That helps."

"But note, I only said 'might.' On the other hand the fact might also be that something so diverting or upsetting occurred shortly after Freddie left that she just forgot about it."

Miss Asche, the office manager, was a nervous, dark-haired woman, somewhere in her forties. She might have been pretty once, but now she was thin, worn. And there was the purple splotch of a birthmark on the right side of her face. Not large or conspicuous, but tragic enough for a woman.

Spike started off with the routine question: "How long have you worked for Mr. Penton?"

"Twenty-six years—off and on."

He looked surprised. "I was not aware that the Penton Press was that old."

"It isn't. But you asked me how long I had worked for Mr. Penton—not the Penton Press."

"I see. Then what do you mean—'off and on'?"

"I was Mr. Penton's first secretary when he went into business with his father years ago, shortly before his marriage. I remained with him until he went overseas in the fall of 1917. I returned to his service when he came back and rejoined his father. When he left his father's firm in 1926 and went with Bascomb & Rogers—they were textile

importers—I went with him as his secretary. I remained there with him until the firm crashed in 1930. When Penton Press was started in the spring of 1931, I returned to his service as his secretary."

"And you have worked here as his secretary ever since?"

"Here—but not as his secretary. Not since 1938. Miss Lee became his secretary then, and has been ever since. I—" She paused, and a wry, bitter smile twisted her lips. "I'm just a clerk, and direct the other clerks, the billers and the file girls and the telephone operator. Oh, I have a fancy title, all right. I'm 'Office Manager,' but it doesn't mean anything. Nothing—" She hesitated. Her voice was acid. "Nothing has meant anything since she came."

"I take it you refer to Miss Lee?"

"Yes."

"When was the last time you saw her alive?"

"Last Friday afternoon shortly before I left. I wasn't feeling well, and I went home early."

"When was the last time you saw Mr. Penton?"

"Thursday. He didn't come to the office Friday at all."

"And Mr. Bishop?"

"Thursday. He wasn't in Friday, either."

"Know where he was?"

"No. But Miss Penton can probably tell you more about him than I can."

"Know anyone named Helen Martin?"

She shook her head.

"Are the girls allowed to smoke in the office?"

"Certainly not. Miss Lee was the only favored one." Again that acid tone.

When she had gone, Spike turned to Herschman and shook his head regretfully. "Sad—women like that."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean it's pretty obvious that she's one of those women who start out being secretary to a man, fall in love with him, and remain faithful dogs the rest of their lives. Miss Asche has probably been in love with Penton all her life. Then along comes a younger, good-looking jane like Lina Lee and cops her place, and she's kicked downstairs."

Anne Penton was the last of the staff to be interviewed. Spike eyed her carefully. He wondered if she remembered him—as he did her. It was impossible to tell, for she betrayed no sign of recognition. There was about her a curious tautness that served to blot out signs of any other emotions. She answered all questions directly and as briefly as possible. Only her hands, ceaselessly twisting a ring on her little finger, gave evidence of an inner tension.

Yes, she had worked in her father's office for almost a year. She

had started as Mr. Havenner's secretary; and, when Mr. Havenner left and Mr. Bishop had taken his place as manufacturing man, she had remained as Mr. Bishop's secretary. That had been seven months ago.

"And when was the last time you saw Mr. Bishop?"

"Thursday night when he left the office."

"Where was he Friday?"

"In Camden, New Jersey, at the offices of the New Jersey Printing Company. They're making two books for us, and he had to discuss certain manufacturing details with the men at the plant."

"And when did he return?"

"Probably Friday night on the train leaving Philadelphia at five-four."

"What do you mean 'probably'?"

"He frequently has to go down there. The New Jersey Printing Company does a great deal of work for us. He usually goes early in the morning, stays all day, and catches the five-four from Philadelphia that puts him here in New York at six-forty."

"You seem to know a lot about train schedules, Miss Penton."

"That's part of a secretary's business."

"Pardon me for asking, but how does it happen that you're working here—just like any other girl?"

She smiled slightly. "Why is that so strange?"

"Well, I mean after all you don't have to, do you?"

"No—I just want to."

"I see. Now tell me, Miss Penton, when was the last time you saw Miss Lee?"

"Friday night."

"What time did you leave the office?"

"A bit after five—I'm not sure of the exact time."

"And Miss Lee was here then?"

"Yes."

"Alone?"

"Yes."

"Quite alone? The office boy had gone?"

"I believe so."

"Now about your father, Miss Penton." Spike watched her closely. At the mention of her father's name the nervous ring twisting stopped. But a tiny pulse in her throat beat quickly.

"When was the last time you saw him?"

"Thursday night, just before he left the office."

"Have you any idea where he might be?"

"No—I—I mean I'm not alarmed about him really. He's impulsive. Likely as not he's gone off—I mean on Thursday night, he probably took a notion into his head to go off somewhere for the week end."

Perhaps on Long Island. He has lots of friends there. Once he reads about this dreadful business in the newspapers he'll be back. I'm sure of it. I'm sure—"

A little too sure—perhaps? Spike wondered.

"You did not see him or hear from him on Friday?"

"No."

"Isn't it possible that he might have telephoned here without your knowing it?"

"Yes."

"He might have telephoned Miss Lee and told her of his plans for the week end?"

"Yes."

"Have you any idea which of his friends he might be visiting?"

"No."

"Can you give us the names of some of them to help us in finding him?"

"Well—no—I mean I don't know many of Father's friends."

"I take it, Miss Penton, you do not live with your father?"

"No."

"How does that happen?"

"Why—you see my mother died when I was only five, and I went to live with my Grandfather Penton. He died two years ago and—I just stayed on at his house."

"The relationship between you and your father is not, I take it, altogether friendly?"

Her voice snapped. "Aren't you assuming a little too much?"

"Well, you've lived apart from him since you were five years old."

"That doesn't mean anything. When my mother died, my father was a young man. It was hard being tied down with a five-year-old child. He's fifty, but he's still young. He's like that. He's gay and charming. He's—" She broke off, realizing suddenly the passion in her voice—a passion of love and devotion.

"Is it really necessary to put my father and me under a microscope? Isn't it your job to find who—how Miss Lee was killed? And to find my father?"

"Perhaps, Miss Penton," Spike suggested with a deceiving casualness. "Perhaps if we find out one—we'll find out the other."

Later that evening as he rode uptown in a taxi he tried not to remember that stricken look in Anne Penton's eyes—a look she had tried so valiantly to suppress, to erase, to keep from him.

Forget it, he told himself. He was going to Cassie Framp's for dinner. The thought of Cassie's incomparable cooking should drive such lesser matters as murder from the mind of any reasonable man. Tomorrow he would take up the threads again—Penton's apartment, Lina Lee's, Bishop's room. Tonight . . .

But Cassie insisted on talking shop. Not, of course, that she realized that it was shop to him. She only knew there had been screaming headlines in the afternoon papers, and she had read them all.

"Why it's almost like in my own family," she explained to Spike. "Rowena here, and knowing Anne Penton the way I do ever since she was a little—" She broke off, eyed him questioningly. "How much do you remember about last night?"

"Quite a bit." He was guarded.

"Do you remember the girl?"

He nodded. He wished she'd change the subject.

Well, that's her. That's Anne Penton. Is it really true," she went on, "that Mr. Penton has disappeared? But they can't think that he—"

"Cassie!" A voice broke in, sharp, peremptory, with a touch of anger.

They both turned toward the door leading into the bedroom. There was a woman standing there.

"What is this man doing here?" she demanded.

"Why, Rowena—I—" Cassie was flustered. "This is—why I don't know his name, but he's—"

"Do you know who he is? Do you realize that he is the detective handling the Penton Press murder case?"

"Wha—" Whatever Cassie had meant to say was drowned by a crash. The soup ladle dropped from her hands, and spilled its contents over the kitchen floor.

"Yes," Spike said quietly. "No need to introduce us. We've met before."

And across the tense silence of the little kitchen he stared at the woman in the doorway. It was Miss Asche, office manager of the Penton Press.

* * *

And so Spike had not stayed to have dinner with Cassie.

The air of the little apartment on East Eighty-fifth Street had been too charged with electrical tension after he and Rowena Asche had acknowledged their previous acquaintanceship. And poor Cassie had stood between them, trying to make sense of it all, the little black mole just above the left-hand corner of her mouth quivering in nervous bewilderment. Now on Wednesday morning he and the Inspector were on their round of apartment inspection. Lina Lee's came first.

"Pretty nifty setup—for a secretary," Spike remarked as they crossed the lobby of a swank building on lower Fifth Avenue. The apartment itself on the tenth floor lived up to the lobby.

Slattery, the detective on duty, gave a brief report. "The management supplies maid service for places like this that are rented furnished. I talked to the girl in charge of this floor, and she says she came in Saturday morning to clean up as usual, but there wasn't much to do.

Miss Lee, apparently, hadn't been home at all."

Spike started a systematic search of the place. There were three rooms—kitchen, living room, and bedroom. The first two yielded little. The bedroom was more interesting. There was a desk and in it a checkbook. The Inspector leafed through it.

"Chase National," he said. "Balance \$4,243.78."

There were two trunks, large-sized wardrobe, because the closet revealed that Lina Lee had a large-sized wardrobe—with labels from the higher-priced shops. One of the trunks was half packed.

"Looks like somebody was planning to go some place," Spike observed. And what he found in the top dresser drawer clinched the observation. "Looky!" and he passed a steamship ticket over to Herschman.

"One way to Buenos Aires, sailing on the United Fruit Line, leaving New York, Monday evening, May 30. That was day before yesterday."

"And here's a passport, all in order too." Spike placed it with the ticket. "Looks like Lina was planning a skip."

For a moment he was thoughtful. Then he said, "Did you find out anything about 'Sam' from Sing Sing?"

"Yeah. I talked to the warden last night. Fellow named Sam Hesketh. We got his photograph and fingerprints this morning and started 'em through the works. He was released May 16. That was two weeks ago Monday. He'd done a ten-year stretch for a jewel racket."

"What kind of a racket?"

"Selling imitation rubies and sapphires as the real thing. You know they can be faked pretty well in the laboratory. I haven't got all the details of the case yet, but I have a man looking up the court records and the trial."

"And this is the guy who writes Lina Lee a letter on Monday, May 9, promising he'll be seeing her. On Monday, May 16, he gets out. And on Monday, May 30, she plans to go to South America."

But that wasn't all they found in Lina Lee's apartment.

There was the onion—the little, incongruous, purple-skinned onion. Incongruous because one doesn't associate onions with the kind of lady's boudoir that reeks of perfume called *Nuit d'Amour a Paris* and Bergdorf-Goodman frocks and hats from Hattie Carnegie. But there it was—on the carpet just to the right of the dresser. A challenging little onion.

Spike picked it up. "Hey, look at this."

Herschman looked at it. "It's an onion."

"No kidding. I wonder did she use it with her bath or is it part of the ritual of some newfangled facial. Wonderful odor. Prince Matchabelli really ought to look into the onion situation."

He wandered out into the kitchen and searched through cupboards and sacks.

"No onions," he reported to the Inspector. "No onions anywhere. Just this poor little one, all by itself. Exhibit V. V for very interesting."

Felix Penton's apartment was on East Seventy-third Street in an old-fashioned brownstone front that had been luxuriously remodeled. He had a handsome duplex on the top floors with a terrace and a view of Central Park. Hayden, the detective in charge, had little to report. Penton employed a maid who came in by the day. She had been there Saturday morning, made up his bed, and done her usual work. She had been there Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday, too, but Penton had not been back.

Spike and the Inspector looked the place over carefully, the first floor and the one above it. It revealed little except every sign of luxurious living.

"Penton Press must be more prosperous than it seems," Herschman put in.

"Maybe," but Spike's tone was skeptical. They stepped out onto the terrace.

"Nice view," Herschman commented.

Yeah. This is nicer though. Looky." Spike was examining the French doors through which they had just come. Herschman bent down to observe a portion of the woodwork next to the lock.

"Jimmied," he said.

Spike nodded. "Looks mighty like. These doors open from the inside, but not from the out—unless you have a key. And someone who hadn't a key has been here."

He walked across the terrace to the parapet on the north side and looked over. "Fire escape," he pointed out. "Someone came up the fire escape and jimmied the door open. I wonder who and when."

When they left to go on to the next stop, the fingerprint men from Headquarters were already at work on the French doors leading onto the terrace.

The place where Stanley Bishop lived on West Ninth Street was a comedown after the luxury of Lina Lee and Felix Penton. It was just a plain, comfortable, rooming house, and the landlady showed them to a plain, comfortable room on the third floor at the rear which she said had been occupied by Stanley Bishop.

"And still is, as far as I'm concerned," she went on. "He's paid his rent up to the end of this week, but he hasn't been here since early Tuesday morning."

"Did you see him go out?"

"No, but at eight o'clock I was up here and made his bed, so he must have left early."

They got rid of the landlady, and Spike looked around him.

"Incidentally," said Herschman, "Bishop was down at Camden at the New Jersey Printing Company all day Friday. I checked up last night by telephone. And he left Friday night on exactly the train his secretary said he'd probably catch."

"The five-four from Philadelphia?"

"Yeah. I talked to the foreman of the plant who said he'd taken Bishop over to Philadelphia to the train in his car himself."

They looked through the dresser drawers and the bookcase. The Inspector went through the desk while Spike explored the closet. There were two suits, a Tuxedo, a top coat, three pairs of shoes on the floor.

There was a crash, and Herschman jumped up from the desk.

Spike was standing in the closet rubbing the back of his head ruefully. "Something hit me," he explained. "These," and he reached down to gather up four heavy books. "They were on the top shelf, shoved way back, wrapped up in a winter overcoat. I pulled the coat out, and they all came tumbling down."

He brought them out to the light.

"Ledgers," Herschman said. "Looks like a full set. Some firm's books."

"Yeah. But what firm?" As Spike posed the question, he was leafing through the big volumes. He repeated names at random from a long list of entries. "Marshall Field & Co., R. H. Macy, Brentano's, Ye Olde Time Booke Nooke . . . Look like the books of a book publishing company. I wonder . . ."

* * *

The office of the Penton Press was not doing business as usual. There were a detective and two patrolmen in charge. The staff, with the exception of Miss Asche, Freddie Bingley, and Anne Penton, had been told to stay at home until further notice.

When Spike and the Inspector arrived, they went immediately to the office of Felix Penton, carrying the four huge volumes they had found in the closet of Stanley Bishop's room.

"Call Miss Asche," Spike told a patrolman.

When she appeared at the door and her glance met Spike's, she stiffened. But neither of them gave any sign of the previous night's encounter at Cassie Framp's. He motioned her to sit down.

"Who was the bookkeeper here?" he asked.

"When the firm first started, there was a Mr. Crummit who did the bookkeeping. But he was fired two years ago."

"Who took his place?"

"Miss Lee."

"But I thought Miss Lee was Mr. Penton's secretary."

"Miss Lee was very versatile. I wasn't the only one she deprived of their job."

"Wasn't that a lot to handle—being Mr. Penton's secretary and keeping the books too?"

"Miss Lee was very clever at 'handling' things—jobs, books, men."

"Would you recognize the books of the Penton Press if you saw them?"

"Of course."

"Are these they?"

She looked over the four volumes quickly, nodded.

"Where were they usually kept?"

"When Mr. Crummit did the bookkeeping, they were in the safe of the cashier's cage. After Miss Lee took them over, she kept them in here in that cabinet." She pointed to a heavy steel cabinet on one side of the room.

Spike got up and tried the door. "Oh, it's locked," she told him. "It always is. And Miss Lee was the only one who had the key."

He bent closer to examine the lock. No jimmying here. This was steel. He dismissed Miss Asche and turned to Herschman. "Get the lock expert from Headquarters to work on that. And tell the fingerprint men when they get through with the job at Penton's apartment to go to Bishop's room. Then everybody assemble here for a big reunion. And everybody move fast."

They did. So fast, in fact, that it wasn't much over an hour before they held old home week in Penton's office.

Schofield, the lock expert, was the first to report. He had opened the steel cabinet. It contained a dozen or so manuscripts. That was all. But there was a wide space on the two middle shelves in which the books that had been taken from Stanley Bishop's closet just fitted.

"And the lock," Schofield pointed out, "while in perfectly good shape and intact, shows signs of having received a wax imprint."

Spike and the Inspector nodded approvingly, and turned to the still damp photographs of three sets of fingerprints which the experts had handed over to them. They nodded with even greater approval at what they found.

They found that prints around the jimmied door corresponded exactly with those on any number of objects in Stanley Bishop's room. And both of the first two sets matched up with several of the prints found on the door of the steel cabinet in Felix Penton's office.

"The man sure left his calling cards every place he went," Spike remarked complacently.

But the strange thing was that they didn't correspond to the fingerprints found on the electric light bulb taken from the desk lamp on Felix Penton's desk.

CHAPTER IV

PHILIP H. BRIDENTHAL lay back against the luxury of a well-upholstered chaise longue in his Park Avenue penthouse and roared in all directions at once. He roared at the butler, at his wife, at the maid, at a sympathetic friend who had the misfortune to drop in.

A broken ankle was stretched out in a cast before him, and the morning papers were scattered over his not inconsiderable paunch and all around the chaise longue. They were screaming the story of the murder of Lina Lee and the disappearance of Felix Penton, even louder than Mr. Bridenthal was roaring.

"Get my lawyer! Get Parry & Dunscombe! Call the doctor! Get me Penton Press on the wire! Tell them . . ."

He had calmed down a bit by the time Herschman and Spike arrived. They had been at the Penton Press offices when the call had come through, and Miss Asche had explained who Philip H. Bridenthal was.

"A silent partner, I suppose you would call him. He's a very rich man who has made a lot of money in different kinds of factories. He has put up most of the capital for the Penton Press. He knows scarcely anything about the business," she went on. "He's only been here in the office once or twice. But perhaps he might—Mr. Penton—" She broke off, her voice uncertain with emotion at the name of Felix Penton. "I mean he might give you some idea—he might be able to help you find Mr. Penton."

Mrs. Bridenthal met them at the door of her husband's room, tense with apologies. "He'll be very difficult. He broke his ankle yesterday morning, and he's still weak from the setting and the anaesthetic." Then she smiled ruefully. "Weak—but not weak enough. He's like a wild bull." She led the way into her husband's room.

"Are you the police? . . . What does this mean? Murder and Penton disappearing? . . . Why wasn't I told before? . . . Has Penton been murdered too . . . Get me Parry & Dunscombe . . . my auditors . . . the books . . . Maybe Penton murdered her . . . maybe . . ."

Presently with the help of his wife they got him calmed into a more coherent mood.

"Sorry, gentlemen," he said, "for bursting out like that all over the place. But this ankle—not being able to get around—"

Spike was soothing and sympathetic, and he tactfully drew from the harassed Bridenthal the story of his relationship to Felix Penton and the Penton Press.

"Known Penton for nine or ten years. Very old friend of Vi's here." He indicated his wife. "Early in 1931 we started the Penton Press. I put up the money, and he did the managing. First few years, of course, with any business are hard. You expect some red ink. But it's been going on for almost ten years now."

"You mean," Spike put in, "Penton Press has never showed a profit?"

"Profit?" Bridenthal snorted. "Why it's never even broken even. And I've simply poured money into it. I tell you, gentlemen, I've about reached the end of my string. I've been connected with a lot of business

enterprises and still am, and, by God, they've paid or I've known the reason why."

"But in ten years," Spike pointed out, "you should have been able to ascertain the reason why."

Bridenthal looked exasperated. "I know. It's my own fault. The trouble is Penton's such a charming fellow. We like to have him around. Charming fellow." He snorted again. "He's probably a murderer."

"Philip, dear," his wife protested, "aren't you jumping at conclusions?"

"All right, maybe he's been murdered himself. I don't know. I'm just the poor sap who's been putting up the money. Why only last week Penton wants me to put in another \$50,000. Says he's got to have it right away to save what's already invested." He turned to his wife. "You heard him, Vi. You were here. Lucky I didn't And you were a sap too, Vi. You were urging me to do it." He turned back to the two men. "My wife here's always thought the publishing business was so interesting. She's the one who originally got me into it."

"Tell me, Mr. Bridenthal," Spike put in, "has there ever been an audit of the Penton Press books?"

"One that I know of. That was by my own auditors, about five years ago."

"And what did it show?"

"Rotten management."

"Was that all?"

"Isn't that enough?"

"I mean no—well, shall we say manipulation of funds?"

"No, no, nothing of that sort. Just bad management."

But that was five years ago, Spike was thinking. A lot can happen in five years. Lina Lee can come to work for the firm and Stanley Bishop, too. Aloud he said: "Would you suggest that a thorough audit of the books is in order now?"

"I certainly would. That's why I've been calling my auditors all morning. Parry & Dunscombe. They'll do the job. I'll have . . ."

When they left, it had been arranged that the audit was to start the next day.

"If we'd told Bridenthal there almost weren't any books to audit he'd have burst a blood vessel sure," Herschman said.

"Yeah," Spike agreed absently. His mind was on something else. But he didn't unburden himself until they were back at Headquarters with the exhibits gathered the previous day from the Penton Press spread out on a table before them. Then he opened his right hand and held out his palm to Herschman.

"Looky."

Herschman looked. There were three cigarettes stubs, rouge-ringed, smelling strongly of tobacco and perfume—a familiar kind of perfume.

They matched perfectly the stubs that had been found in the office of the Penton Press with the shreds of flowers and the two rhinestone sets.

"I palmed 'em up there," and Spike nodded in the direction of the Bridenthal penthouse. "Mrs. Bridenthal. Pretty nervous smoker. And a pretty nifty-looking dame, if you ask me. And did you notice how all the time we were there she was tearing little shreds from the flowers on the table beside the chaise longue? And she's left-handed, too."

* * *

"Can't stand mushrooms. Gimme the hives." The man inspecting the electrical wiring in the Bridenthal penthouse gossiped with the housemaid as he worked. "Strawberries too. Something wrong here with this connection." He stood up and brushed off his overalls and picked up a screw driver.

"I just can't understand it," the maid said. "It works all right. Why there was a man here only the other day fixing up lights all over the house."

"Yeah, I know. But I'm a special monthly service man. Edison company's puttin' 'em on all over town. This here connection goes into the bedroom. Let's have a look in there."

The maid followed him into the bedroom. He snapped lights on and off and tapped wires, and pulled plugs out and stuck them back in again. "Trouble's here in this closet," he said. He opened a closet door upon rows of dresses sheathed in cellophane covers, tier upon tier of shoes, and boxes and boxes of hats. He pulled a light cord.

"Doggone!" he burst out. "Left my pliers downstairs. Musta put 'em on that ledge in the kitchen when I was testin' the stove. Be a good girl and run down and get 'em for me." He smiled down at her—and she went. . . .

When she returned he expressed himself satisfied with the state of the Bridenthal wiring. She was a pretty little thing, so he chuckled her under the chin and gave her a kiss before he left. She felt her heart warm to the Edison Company for putting on special inspectors, and decided a month was a long time to wait.

* * *

"How'd you get it?" Herschman snapped suspiciously.

"If I told you, you'd be compounding a felony or an accessory after the fact or something of the sort. So we'll just skip that. But it's from Mrs. Philip Bridenthal's closet."

The Inspector looked away. Not that he didn't believe Spike. But he knew that sometimes his methods . . . He turned the slipper over in his hands, gazed at the jeweled heels.

"Well," Spike said impatiently, "aren't you going to try 'em out?" He indicated two rhinestones, one green and the other red, lying on a piece of tissue which Herschman had taken from his safe.

The heel of the slipper was made of brilliants with a pattern of flowers inlaid in colored stones—a pattern marred somewhat by the fact that two of the colored stones were missing.

Impatiently Spike snatched the slipper from the Inspector, and picked up the two glittering sets from the piece of tissue. They fitted exactly into the pattern, completing its gaudy, glittering mosaic.

"And that ain't all," he said. "I gossiped with the housemaid. Last Friday night the Bridenthals gave a dinner party, but at the last minute, after Mrs. Bridenthal was all dressed, she developed a headache and had to beg off. Got one of the women guests to take her place as hostess."

"Then what did she do?"

"I don't know, but I've an idea she went down to the office of the Penton Press. I think we're through paging 'Helen Martin.'"

* * *

"Shopping, darling. You don't mind, do you?" Violet Bridenthal pulled on her gloves and adjusted her hat before the mirror in her husband's bed room.

"Say, if I minded you going shopping, I'd be in my grave by this time." Philip Bridenthal surveyed his wife approvingly. Damn fine-looking woman, Vi. Expensive-looking. Life for her was a continual shopping expedition. Expensive. But she was worth it. When people looked at her, they knew, by God, that she was the wife of a rich man. Nobody could say Philip Bridenthal didn't know how to keep a woman.

"I mean you don't mind staying alone for a while, do you? I'll be back for lunch." She bent absently and kissed him. He tried to draw her down closer, but she slipped away.

She called a taxi instead of the Bridenthal chauffeur. No use setting the servants to gossiping. It was bad enough already . . . that telephone call this morning from the detective who had been there the day before. Thank God she had been in her own sitting room and not in Philip's bedroom.

"Police Headquarters," she told the taxi driver. With her left hand she fiddled nervously with the fastening on her right glove. She lit a cigarette, but threw it away after a few puffs. She worried the clasp on her handbag until it snapped.

Herschman and Spike were waiting for her. She tried to be very charming and airy, and all the time she was wondering how long her knees would bear up.

"Tell me, Mrs. Bridenthal," Herschman said, when they were seated, "what you were doing last Friday night."

She tried to look surprised. "Why—I don't remember. I mean why do you ask?"

"Never mind why. Just answer the question."

She wrinkled her brows, thinking. "Oh, yes, of course. How stupid of me to forget. We gave a dinner party."

"Where?"

"At home. And at the last minute I simply couldn't go through with it. I had a splitting headache, so I got Mrs. Stockton, a very dear friend of mine, to do the honors for me, and I spent the evening in bed."

"All of it?"

"Why, of course. Where else would I be, with a splitting headache?"

"You're quite sure about that?"

She bridled. "Certainly I'm sure. Are you questioning my word?"

"Come off it, Mrs. Bridenthal," Spike broke in.

She turned on him indignantly. A shade too indignantly. "Are you accusing me of lying?"

He nodded complacently. "Yeah."

"Why I—I... She gripped her handbag tensely.

"Skip it. Play acting won't do you any good. Last Friday night you left your house somewhere around eight o'clock and went down to the Penton Press. You registered with the night elevator operator as 'Helen Martin,' giving a phony address. In the Penton Press offices you sat at a desk well up forward toward the reception room. You smoked five cigarettes, tore shreds from a bunch of freesias you were wearing, and lost two brilliants from the heel of your slipper. Here's your slipper. We're keeping the brilliants."

Her gaze jerked from one to the other of the two men. Her tense hands lost their tenseness in crazy trembling. She caught hold of the arms of her chair.

"I—what—I mean . . ." Then she gave way. Before the barrage of evidence there was nothing else to do. Her hands dropped weakly into her lap, and she nodded her head slowly. "Yes, that's right. How did you know?"

"That's not important. What is important is why you went there and what happened."

"You mean—"

"Exactly what I said. Why did you ditch a dinner party on the plea of a headache and go down there last Friday night?"

"I—because—" She hesitated. Then suddenly she burst forth. "Because I was only trying to protect my husband's interests."

"Please explain yourself."

"Why—I mean, isn't it plain enough after the talk you had with my husband yesterday? You heard what he said. The Penton Press affairs have been in bad shape. He has been asking for an accounting. I—I went down there to talk to Mr. Penton. After all I was the one originally responsible for my husband's putting his money into this business. I thought perhaps I might be able to—to . . . I had to see Mr. Penton."

"Couldn't it have waited until Saturday morning or Monday or Tuesday?"

"Why—why yes, I suppose so. But—but I mean I'm very impulsive."

"Very," Spike agreed skeptically. "And did you see Mr. Penton?"

"Yes. I telephoned him, and he told me to meet him there."

"And to sign a false name to the register?"

"No. I mean—I thought it wiser."

"Why?"

"Oh because—because my actions might be misconstrued. You know how people are."

"Your husband, for instance?"

Her eyes flashed with indignation, but again the shading was slightly too heavy.

"Did your husband know you came down here to see Mr. Penton?"

"No. It was my own idea. I mean I thought I might be able to—to do something."

"And were you able—to do something?"

She shook her head. "No—I really didn't get a chance to speak to Mr. Penton. When I arrived, there was already someone working in the office. Mr. Bishop, I believe. Then Mr. Penton came—he was late—and said he wanted to talk to Mr. Bishop for a few minutes and he would get rid of him so that we could have the place to ourselves."

"And did he?"

"He—I—he spent such a long time with Mr. Bishop that—I got angry and left."

"Another one of those impulsive impulses, I suppose," Spike remarked dryly. "And so you left Mr. Penton and Mr. Bishop in the office together?"

"Yes."

"What did you do after that?"

"I went home."

"And stayed there?"

"Yes."

Spike paused for a moment, drumming lightly on the table with his knuckles. Then he shot the question at her. "Did you know Lina Lee?"

"I—why yes."

"How well?"

"Only slightly."

"When and under what circumstances did you meet her?"

"Oh—I don't remember exactly. Perhaps some time when I happened into the offices of the Penton Press with my husband."

"But I understand that your husband didn't drop into the offices of the Penton Press very often."

"No. That's true. Which just shows that I knew Miss Lee only slightly."

"Tell me, Mrs. Bridenthal, how did you get into the office Friday night?"

"I had a key. It belongs to my husband."

"And did you while you were there go into Mr. Penton's private office?"

"No."

"Did he?"

"I believe he started in once. There was something wrong with the switch or something. Anyway there wasn't any light."

"Interesting, that," Spike said after she had left. "I mean about the light."

Herschman nodded. "Yeah, only maybe it's true and maybe it ain't."

"I know. The woman's a godawful liar. Concerned about her husband's business interests, my eye! She's concerned all right, but not about that."

"Well then, about what?"

Spike shrugged his shoulders. "A man maybe."

"And there were two men with her in the office Friday night—Penton and Bishop."

"Yeah. But where are they now?"

The answer came sooner than they expected.

CHAPTER V

DRIVER 42738 of the Interstate Bus Company searched his conscience and found it clear. He had violated no traffic laws, either city or state, nor any company regulations. Of that he was sure. Then why, he asked himself, should he get notice to hand over his run to a substitute and appear before the company detective at the New York terminal?

He soon found out.

"And just to save repetition," the company detective said at the conclusion of the interview, "we'll go straight to Headquarters."

Driver 42738 felt a great relief—and a great excitement.

At Headquarters there was a slight delay while the company detective parleyed with the Missing Persons Bureau. Finally they were turned over to a plain-clothes man who escorted them to the office of the Chief of the Homicide Squad.

"This bus driver here has something on that Lina Lee case," he explained. "Tell 'em."

So Driver 42738 told 'em. "My regular run is from New York to Hunter in the Catskills. I start in the morning at 8:20 and get up there at 1:35. Well, Tuesday morning I was on my regular trip up. About half full. We were late getting into Hunter by about two hours. Struck a brush and forest fire on the Rip Van Winkle Trail between Haines Falls and Tannersville.

"After everybody cleared out at Hunter there was still these left."

He indicated a small overnight case and a coat which they had brought with them. "I brought 'em back with me yesterday and turned 'em in to the lost and found at the New York terminal."

"And I gave 'em the once over," the company detective put in. "I'd gotten notices of course from the Missing Persons Bureau about Felix Penton and this fellow Bishop, and I was on the lookout. I decided you'd be interested."

The overnight case had two initials—S. B. The pockets of the coat yielded among the usual miscellany of coat pockets, the stub of a ticket to Hunter, a bunch of keys, and two letters. The letters were bills—one from a clothing firm and one from a florist shop—and they were addressed to Mr. Stanley Bishop at the West Ninth Street rooming house.

"What'd he look like?" Spike demanded of the bus driver.

"You mean the guy these belong to? I couldn't remember. After you been driving a bus for a while, you get so you don't notice people's looks much. Just where they're going and if their tickets are O.K."

"I showed him the photo of Bishop the Missing Persons Bureau broadcast," the company detective explained, "but he says he don't know. Didn't notice the man's face."

"Where'd he get on?" Spike asked.

"New York, I guess. That's a New York-to-Hunter stub."

"And why'd he leave his coat and bag behind when he got off at Hunter?"

"Maybe he didn't get off at Hunter. I don't think he did. I think I'd noticed a fella getting off without any coat or baggage. I think maybe he got off—" Driver 42738 paused to re-examine a theory. "I think he must of got off somewhere between Haines Falls and Tannersville. I said there was a brush and forest fire that delayed us. I had to pull over to the side of the road and wait. Most of the men got out and went up ahead to watch the fire. I had to wait over an hour. Then I honked the horn and drove up the road slowly, and a bunch of 'em got back in and we went on. Maybe this fella got out, but didn't get back in."

"Yeah, maybe. But why would he leave his coat and bag behind?" Herschman protested.

Spike smiled wryly. "As I said once before, this guy sure believes in leaving his calling cards every place he goes." He jingled the keys he had taken from the coat impatiently. Herschman caught on right away and gave a gesture of dismissal to the two bus men.

When they were alone, Spike took another look at the initials on the bag. He eyed them critically.

"They look funny."

"How do you mean, funny?"

"Oh, I dunno. Just funny. Let's try these out on a few places." He indicated the bunch of keys.

At the end of an hour they had tried them out on three different places—Stanley Bishop's rooming house, Lina Lee's apartment, and the offices of the Penton Press.

"I'm disappointed," Spike confessed. "I thought maybe they'd fit Lina Lee's apartment. I thought maybe they might be the keys that should have been in her handbag and weren't."

"Oh, I don't know as you have anything to crab about," Herschman said.

There were four of them—one for the front door of the West Ninth Street rooming house, one for Bishop's room, one for the offices of the Penton Press—and one to the steel cabinet that had held the company's books in Felix Penton's office.

"Obviously recently made," Spike observed as he examined this last key carefully. He looked puzzled. "Why the hell should Bishop take all the trouble to swipe the company's books and then go off and leave 'em?"

But Inspector Herschman didn't know the answer.

In the lobby of the building housing the Penton Press they parted. "I'm taking my own car," Spike explained. "I'm going up to the Catskills. I'll be seeing you."

Late that afternoon he enlisted the aid of the State Police at Kingston.

"Sure, we remember the fire," the officer on duty said. "Last Tuesday afternoon. Most of the force and half the natives were out fighting it."

"Any casualties?"

"Three. Two of 'em got overcome by smoke but they're O.K. now."

"Who's the third?"

"Dunno. They were using dynamite to blast trees to make a fire-guard. He was helping. A forest fire's sort of a general emergency. Everybody turns to. Well this fellow was working with the blasting crew, and he doesn't get out in time. A tree fell and bopped him good and hard on the head. He's in the hospital here. Hasn't regained consciousness yet. Doctor says it's concussion."

A State Trooper accompanied Spike to the Kingston hospital to help cut through official red tape.

"Let me see his clothes first," Spike demanded, and they brought him the underwear and trousers which had been taken from the injured man. He compared the trousers with a coat he had locked in the rumble seat of his car. He grinned. Matched exactly.

The doctor said they could go in, but quietly. The man mustn't be disturbed or upset.

Spike dismissed the State Trooper and went into the room alone. There was a man lying on the bed, a young man, with dark rumpled

hair and white unshaven face. Occasionally he stirred, murmured an incoherency.

Spike sat down beside the bed and waited. It was getting dark now, and it was very quiet in the little hospital. He listened for the occasional mutterings, and sometimes he made notes when coherence emerged. As the night wore on, the man grew more restless, and the mutterings increased.

"... deserved . . . be shot . . . bitch . . . fuzzy top . . . Anne . . . get to fuzzy top . . . Felix of fuzzy top . . . Anne . . ."

Anne . . . always that name running through the delirium, through the mumbling and muttering . . . Anne . . .

But Spike wasn't surprised. He recognized the man on the bed. It was the young man who had been with Anne Penton that Monday night in the taxi.

* * *

Spike stayed that night in Kingston, but when he left the next morning there was a detective from Headquarters in New York and a departmental doctor lifting into a New York City ambulance the stretcher on which Stanley Bishop lay.

He drove on up the Rip Van Winkle Trail, not quite sure of himself. He had so little to go on. The stub of a New York-to-Hunter ticket and a few mumbled phrases . . . *fuzzy top . . . get to fuzzy top . . . Felix of fuzzy top . . .*

At Hunter he went into the drugstore. He ordered a chocolate malted and drank it slowly, making it last a long time. He chatted with the soda jerk. For his particular purpose the soda jerk was made to order. A native of the district and gabby.

"Sure, I guess I know just about everybody around here. Living here all my life and working in the store like I do. Of course, summer people, they're different. Hard to keep track of 'em."

"Many of 'em up here yet?"

"Little early. They start about the middle of June. A few here already though."

Spike wanted desperately to ask whether he knew anyone named Felix Penton, but decided against it. With a gabby kid like that—and a little town—and Felix Penton's name all over the New York papers that penetrated even to this remote village . . .

He approached the subject obliquely. "Funny names some of these summer people give their places. Noticed as I drove up."

"Yeah," the boy agreed. "Family bought the old Fleming farm out west of town and they got it all fixed up and called it Idlewild Manor. Manor!" The boy snorted. "Then there's silly ones like Bide-a-Wee and Fuzzy Top Lodge and Drive-Rite-In and—"

"Fuzzy Top Lodge. That's a queer one."

"Yeah, only not so queer as you'd think. It's south of the road to

Hensonville back in the hills a way, set up on top of an awful bald, rocky point. No grass or anything around it, just a lot of some kind of fuzzy weed."

"Who lives there?"

"Dunno the name. Some fellow bought it about six, seven years back, but he's never there much. Just once in a while him and his wife'll come up for a week end. Keep to themselves mostly."

It was simple after that. A few casual inquiries from natives along the road to Hensonville, and he found it easily enough.

The driveway that led from a side road up to the top of the bald, fuzzy knob of a hill was overgrown with weeds, and the house itself, a low, sprawling structure of natural logs, looked deserted.

Spike stopped his car and turned off the engine and honked. There was no answer. He got out and walked about the place. There was a garage in the rear, but it was locked. Most of the curtains in the house were down. There was no sign of life. And then he noticed that the front door was open.

He walked in and peered about in the half light. The room in which he found himself was long and low and dark. There was wicker furniture and lots of Indian rugs on the floor and a huge fireplace at one end. At the other end there was a wide couch and beside it a table holding cigarettes, a pipe and a half-consumed drink. And on the couch a man was lying.

Spike crossed the room swiftly and stood looking down at him. A handsome fellow, his dark hair just touched with gray. He was dressed in slacks and moccasins with his shirt open at the throat. He was resting easily, breathing regularly in deep sleep. He looked completely carefree and comfortable.

Spike sat down in a chair by the couch, lit a cigarette, and waited. But presently he got tired of waiting. He made a little noise. No response from the man on the couch. So he made quite a lot of noise. The man stirred, and his eyes fluttered open. He yawned and stretched. Then he turned over and settled back to sleep.

"Hey!" Spike said.

The man opened his eyes again, and they rested on Spike. He blinked, fought off drowsiness, sat up slowly. Then he smiled—a smile so disarming . . . so charming . . .

"Who are you?" he asked quite simply. "Will you have a drink? Are you spending the week, or did you just come in out of the sun?"

"I—" Spike started to speak, but before the man's candor and charm he felt himself suddenly at a disadvantage. "Do you mind telling me first who *you* are?"

The man laughed. "Of course. But don't look so worried about it, pardner. Or is 'brother' the proper term around here? Yes, I guess 'brother.' Pardner's for New Mexico and the movies and—"

"Never mind about that. The name please."

"Penton. Begins with a P as in Pernambuco, peripatetic, pusillanimous, paral—"

Spike held up a hand like a traffic cop calling a halt. "I get it. The general idea, at least. Is the name that goes with Penton by any chance Felix?"

"How'd you guess?"

"Oh—I have to do a lot of guessing in my business."

Felix Penton groaned. "Stock broker? Listen, brother, don't try to sell me any stock because—"

"I'm not a stockbroker," Spike interrupted. "I'm a detective." He watched his man narrowly, carefully.

"Detective!" Penton brightened. "Wonderful. I'm crazy about detectives. I listen to Gang Busters every week. I think I'm really a Junior G-Man at heart. I'm like a kid down in my office in New York who's—"

Again the traffic stop sign. "Yeah," Spike said, "it's about your office in New York that I've come to talk to you, Mr. Penton."

"O.K. What have I done now? Made a mistake on my income tax or parked in front of a fire hydrant?" He lay back against the pillows and lit a cigarette.

"Neither one." Spike paused. Then he let it out. "Someone's been killed—in your office."

Penton's hand holding the cigarette paused half-way to his lips. "Huh?" he said and sat up again.

"Someone's been killed—in your office."

"Wha—who?"

"Your secretary, Miss Lina Lee."

"Miss Lee?"

"Yeah."

"But—but how?"

"Someone shot her."

"Someone—" He tamped out the cigarette. He looked dazed. Or was he just play acting? Spike didn't know. He'd sobered though. When he spoke, his voice was hesitant. "You say 'shot her.' You mean—murdered her?"

Spike nodded.

Penton drew in a deep, sharp breath. He gripped the edge of the couch. "When—when did it happen?"

"That's what I'm trying to find out. I thought you might help me."

"I? Of course, if I can, but— Just a moment. Might I ask if you have any credentials?"

"None except my word. But if you'd care to telephone to Inspector Herschman of the Homicide Squad in New York City, he'll vouch for

me. He'll be glad to talk to you, too. You know you're listed as 'missing.'"

"Really? How very melodramatic!" Penton was calm and cool now. "I suppose you want to know where I was on the night of May so-and-so-and-so?"

"Yeah," Spike said dryly, "that's exactly what I want to know. Where were you from Thursday of last week on?"

"Let's see. Friday I didn't come down to the office at all. I didn't feel so well. Saturday I felt worse—as if I needed to get away from the city—so I took my car out Saturday afternoon and came up here. If you'll check with the garage where I keep it—"

"I have already."

"Oh, I see. Already I'm the hunted fugitive. Am I supposed to be the murderer?"

Spike shrugged his shoulders in a who-knows gesture. "Tell me, what did you do Friday evening?"

"Friday? Let me see. Oh yes. I stayed home in bed all day until after dinner. Then I went down to the office about eight or nine o'clock. I had made up my mind to come away, and I wanted to see my manufacturing man about something."

"And did you see him?"

"Yes, he was there."

"And when did you leave?"

"Oh, about nine-thirty or ten. I don't remember exactly."

"And then?"

"Then I went home and to bed, and the next day I came up here. And I've been here ever since. Practically incomunicado. I've only been down to the village once, and I haven't even seen a newspaper."

Maybe, Spike thought. And then again, maybe you have. Aloud he said: "Tell me, Penton, on Friday night—" He broke off, listened. There was the sound of a car coming up the driveway. Penton looked puzzled, worried. He rose. The car had stopped now in front of the house. Spike stepped back into the shadows of the room.

And then there was the swift rush of someone across the threshold, and a voice high-pitched with latent hysteria. "Oh Felix—Felix—why did you—"

It seemed to Spike as if she would have flung herself upon Penton, but he held her off, started talking rapidly, loudly to drown out her voice.

"My dear, how charming, how perfectly charming of you. But how in the world did you know where to find me? You're as smart as this gentleman here. He's just descended upon me from the New York Police Department and is asking me all about where I was last Friday night and why. He's—"

This time there was no mistaking the man. He was talking, talking

fast and hard, as a warning, but trying to cover it up with the airy manner of welcoming host.

Spike grinned inwardly. And his satisfaction only increased when the full light from the open door caught the woman and he could see her plainly. It was Mrs. Philip H. Bridenthal.

* * *

The ride back to New York was a strange and silent one. Felix Penton in the rumble seat alone. Violet Bridenthal in front beside Spike. He had arranged it so.

"But that's perfectly ridiculous," she had protested. "How will I get my car back to New York? Mr. Penton can ride with me instead of sitting in that uncomfortable rumble seat of yours and—"

But Spike was adamant. The last thing in the world he wanted was a chance for Violet Bridenthal and Felix Penton to get together for a *tete-tete*.

"But my car—" she had persisted.

"That will be taken care of. The New York Police Department will send a man up to drive it back. Mr. Penton's too. In the meantime . . ." Spike paused slyly. "In the meantime you can tell your husband it stalled on the road to—ah—shall we say Montclair—any place where you have friends—and you had to come home in a taxi."

"I don't know what you mean."

"Don't you?" And he had let it go at that. No use arguing with her.

After that first impassioned rush into the arms of Felix Penton—or at least it would have been into his arms had he not acted quickly—she had seen Spike in the shadows of the room. She had seemed almost dazed by his sudden presence. And then a hard armor of caution had slipped over her, and she had caught at the airy chatter of Felix Penton and tossed it back.

"Just driving by—and I thought I'd drop in. I was sure I'd find you here. The whole town—this young man particularly—is looking for you, Felix. You're front page famous."

But she didn't fool Spike for a minute. He could feel the tension under the airy camouflage.

At Hunter he had pulled the car up at the curb in front of the drugstore, shouted to the soda jerk who had served him that morning, and summoned him to the sidewalk. He flipped a half dollar to him "Gimme a package of Luckies. And maybe the lady here would like . . ." With a gesture he directed the attention of the boy to Violet Bridenthal. "Any particular brand you'd care for?" he asked solicitously.

"No thanks," she said icily. "I have my own."

The boy went into the store and came back with the cigarettes. "Thanks," Spike said. "Thanks. What's your name?"

The boy looked a little surprised, but answered readily enough.
"Most everybody calls me Johnny. Johnny Putnam."

"Well, so long Johnny," and Spike slid the car away from the curb.

It was late when they arrived in New York. He dropped the woman off at her apartment, but Penton he took on with him to Headquarters. They went immediately to the office of the Inspector.

"Tell the Missing Persons Bureau to take a vacation," he said to Herschman. "This is Felix Penton," and briefly he related the story of his visit to Hunter. But he omitted any reference to Stanley Bishop and the strange delirious mutterings that had given the tip-off. "I just played a hunch," he said in explanation.

Very carefully he went over with Penton, for the benefit of the Inspector, the conversation which the two of them had had in that half-lit room at Fuzzy Top Lodge.

"And then, Mr. Penton," Spike went on, "we were interrupted, you remember. I was about to ask you whether Mr. Bishop was alone in the office."

"Yes." Quickly, without hesitation.

"He was alone when you got there?"

"Yes."

"Who left first, you or he?"

"I did."

"And he was alone when you left?"

"Yes."

"There was no one there in the office but you and Bishop on Friday night?"

"No one. Just the two of us."

"Where were you working or consulting or whatever you did?"

"In Mr. Bishop's office."

"Why not in yours?"

"Well, Bishop had a lot of figures and stuff all laid out on his desk, and it was handier. And anyway, there was no light in my office."

"How do you know that?"

"I tried the switch. The bulbs had probably burned out."

"So you didn't go into your own office at all?"

"No. Why—why is that important?"

"Never mind, but tell me something else. Tell me, Mr. Penton, what is your—ah—relation to Mrs. Bridenthal?"

Penton smiled. "You policemen have the damndest, dirtiest minds—if you don't mind my saying so."

"Oh we don't mind in the slightest—provided you answer the question."

"If this were the movies, I'd stand up on my hind legs and bust you both on the jaw."

"But it isn't the movies, so will you please answer the question? What is your relationship with Mrs. Bridenthal?"

"What do you suppose it is? Mrs. Bridenthal is a very charming lady, the wife of my partner, Mr. Philip H. Bridenthal. I am a frequent guest at the house—and they at mine. Sorry, gentlemen, I can't furnish you with a juicier story than that."

When Penton left Police Headquarters that night, there was a plain-clothes detective in his wake. Not, of course, that he knew it. If he had, perhaps he would not have done the thing he did. He went to the West Ninth Street address of Stanley Bishop and asked to see him.

"What?" he said incredulously as the landlady replied to his inquiry with the news that Mr. Bishop wasn't in, hadn't been in since Tuesday morning. "You mean—"

"I mean there's something very queer about it all. The police were looking for him, and took away some big books from his room."

The face of Felix Penton was thoughtful as he descended the steps and hailed a cab.

Later that night the plain-clothes man reported it all to the Inspector and Spike.

"And did he go from West Ninth Street to Bridenthal's?"

"No. He went straight home. Just stopped once to buy a whole wad of newspapers at a corner stand."

Spike nodded. "Boning up on his homework."

But the thing that interested him most was the telephone call he put through to Hunter to Mr. Johnny Putnam at the Hunter Pharmacy.

"Sure, yeah," Johnny said in answer to Spike's question. "Yeah, I remember her. You don't forget a good-looking blonde like that . . . No, I don't know their name. I told you they was summer folks, and I couldn't remember their names, but they usta . . ."

Spike hung up the telephone and turned to Herschman. "Felix Penton," he said, "is a very gallant gentleman—and a goddam liar. This morning when we left Hunter I took care that the soda jerk in the Hunter Pharmacy had a chance to take a good look at Violet Bridenthal sitting on the seat beside me. And he says he remembers her. Her and Penton. Not by name. He doesn't remember names. Penton's just a guy who bought Fuzzy Top Lodge 'six, seven years back. Once in a while him and his wife'll come up for a week-end.' He's just identified Violet Bridenthal as Penton's 'wife'."

"Huh?" Herschman looked startled.

"Or rather I should say his *first* wife. Johnny's is a pure and un-sullied mind. The mere fact that a gent takes a lady to a mountain hideaway is as good as a marriage certificate to him."

"But what does he mean, 'first'?"

"Well, he says that lately, the last year or so, Penton has been coming up to Hunter occasionally with his 'second' wife."

"And who's she?"

"He said she was a dark, good-looking dame—sorta Spanish-like.' Does that mean anything to you, Inspector?"

Herschman was still trying to take it all in and he shook his head.

"Does to me. I said almost the same thing, the only time I saw her. I said she was a hot-looking wench—a bit Carmen-ish."

Suddenly Herschman understood. "You mean—"

"Yeah, Lina Lee."

CHAPTER VI

THEY had brought Bishop down in an ambulance, and the trip had not been a good one—for him. He was worse. Not even muttering in delirium now. Just sunk into coma.

"There's no charge against him—yet," Herschman said, "so we can't take him to the criminal ward at Bellevue."

"Don't worry," Spike said. "He's going to be handled lovingly at my own personal expense at a private hospital where we can keep one of our own men right beside his bed day and night."

And so the newspaper story that told of the finding of the two men so sensationaly missing in the Lina Lee murder case, made no mention of the hospital to which Bishop had been taken. Just "a private hospital in the city."

The first editions were on the streets at ten on Saturday morning and by ten-thirty, Anne Penton was at Headquarters.

"I was expecting you," Spike said with irritating calmness. "You want to know where Bishop is."

"Yes—tell me . . ." She was breathless and her cheeks were flushed and her hands were nervous.

"Sorry," Spike said, "but I'm afraid Mr. Bishop's in no condition to be bothered with business details right now."

"But I didn't mean—business—I just—"

"Oh, I see. You mean you don't want to see him as his secretary at Penton Press. You want to see him just as—youself."

"Yes—I must see him—please . . ."

The door burst open, and a man strode in. The girl looked up. Then in a swift rush she was across the room.

"Father—oh Father." She was in his arms, her head pressed against his shoulder, shaking with sobs. He patted her gently and sprinkled soothing little kisses on her cheeks, her neck, on the little hollow where golden hair swept up from her ear.

"Oh Father—I was so worried. Why didn't you tell me—why didn't you let me know where you were?"

He laughed softly. "I didn't know I was even being missed. Let alone hunted for. I was just having a nice rest alone up at Fuzzy Top."

"But why didn't you call me last night? I didn't know until I read the papers this morning. I went right to your apartment, but you were gone. Why didn't—"

"Anne, darling, you know I've never been a model parent. I never think to do any of the things I should do."

"Yes, I know. Oh Father, I'm so glad you're here."

"But what I want to know," he said teasingly, "is what you're doing down here among these cut-throats of the Police Department."

She looked confused. "I—I had to find out where—Mr. Bishop was."

"Well, from all I've read in the papers Bishop's in no condition to be handling any business right now, so you better just run back to the office like a good girl and carry on. Is Miss Asche there?"

"Yes."

"Well, she'll know what to do about everything. Now run along." He kissed her lightly. "I want to talk to these flatfeet."

"But Father—I—"

"Tell Miss Asche to get me some money from the bank. I'll be down at the office presently."

"Father, you don't understand." She dried her tears, and a new firmness came into her voice. "I must see Mr. Bishop. Not about business. I must see him—because—" She fumbled.

Penton laughed teasingly. "My, my, what's this?"

"Don't Father—please—"

"You're not—ah—shall we say personally interested in this heel, are you?"

She flared. "He's not a heel."

"And don't look so stricken. He is a heel. Maybe worse. From reports this morning he may soon be a corpse."

"No—no—"

"Well darling, corpse or heel, he's nothing to you. Now run along and—"

"Father, I won't—I can't—"

"Anne!" The voice was sharp, curt. "No scenes please. Now go back to the office and keep out of this mess."

Under the cutting sting of his voice the girl turned and stumbled from the room. For a moment Spike hesitated. Then he let himself give that to the man in the room."

He pressed the note into her trembling hand. She looked up at out quietly and followed her. He caught up with her in the lower hall, laid a detaining hand on her arm.

"For your information only," he said. "Polyclinic Hospital, Room 448. I'll give you a note." He tore a leaf from an address book and

scribbled a few lines and signed his name. "If you have any trouble him, bewildered, but with eyes that were brimming with more than tears.

"Oh—thank you—"

"Never mind," he said. "I always was a pushover for a loving and devoted couple."

When he got back to the Inspector's office, Penton had recovered his poise. Completely. He was sitting in Herschman's easy chair offering Herschman a cigar and smiling that charming, disarming smile with which he had first greeted Spike at Fuzzy Top.

"I've just been telling the Inspector," he explained as Spike came in, "that I've not been entirely—shall we say frank?"

"That's rather a delicate way of putting it," Spike conceded and took a chair.

"All right then. I lied to you last night."

"Tell us something we don't know."

"You see—" Penton leaned forward earnestly. "I want to be as helpful as possible, and I guess that isn't the best way. Only last night I . . ." He hesitated.

"Don't beat around the bush, Penton," Spike said impatiently.

"Very well then. I lied when I said that there was no one in the Penton Press office Friday night but Bishop and myself. There was someone else."

"Who?"

"A lady. That's why I lied. I didn't want her to—to get tangled up in this affair."

"But she already is."

"Yes, I know. After I left here last night, I went to Bishop's rooming house. I didn't know then that he was among the missing. I was going to get him to—well, to tell the same story. He wasn't there, of course. When I got home, I telephoned Mrs. Bridenthal, and she told me that my lying was futile, that you knew already that she'd been there."

"So now you've come to tell us what?"

"Just that. And to confirm what Mrs. Bridenthal has already told you. She did telephone me Friday night and ask to see me. She did go down to the Press offices. She did want to talk to me about her husband's business affairs. And she did get tired of waiting and go home."

He paused, smiled. "Of course you'll say—and I don't blame you the slightest—you'll say that it's very easy for me to confirm Mrs. Bridenthal's story after I've talked to her. And you're quite right. The only thing is that her 'story' just happens to be the truth."

Spike looked skeptical, and Penton sensed it. He shrugged his shoulders. "Sorry, but that's that. If you don't believe me, you don't. So let's go on to something else."

"What else?"

"Bishop."

"Yeah. What about him?"

"I don't know. That's for you to judge. I can only present the evidence."

"All right. Go ahead."

"I've been—shall I say uneasy about Bishop. Or at least I was made uneasy about him. To tell the truth, I never paid a great deal of attention to him. Havenner, who preceded him in the job, recommended him, said he was good, and, as far as I can make out, he has been good. I mean he gets the books manufactured, and he doesn't bother me with details. What more could I ask? But Miss Lee—" He broke off, hesitated.

"Yeah?" Spike prodded him on.

"She didn't like him. Well, perhaps that's unjust. It wasn't just a matter of liking or disliking. After all in business you can't let your personal feelings run away with you. She didn't trust him. She even went so far as to suggest that I fire him. She said she thought he was crooked."

"Was he?"

"I have no idea. I told Miss Lee that that was a pretty grave charge to bring against a man, and asked her what proof she had. She said that frankly she had none—just then. That was more than a week ago."

"And what happened after that?"

"Nothing. I told Miss Lee that when she had definite proof of any irregularity on Bishop's part to come to me and we'd discuss the matter again, but that was the last I heard of it. I'm telling it to you now for what it's worth."

After Penton left, Spike and Herschman discussed its worth for a long time, but they could come to no conclusions. Spike had a date for lunch, and he didn't get back to Headquarters until three o'clock. He found Herschman striding up and down his office, chewing a cigar and sweating.

"You know those photographs of Bishop the Missing Persons Bureau broadcast?" he demanded before Spike had time to take off his hat.

"Yeah. What about 'em?"

"One of the guards up at Sing Sing has just been in. Positively identified the photograph. Says the name's Stanley all right, but not Bishop. It's—

"Wait a minute," Spike broke in. "Don't tell me. Let me guess. It's

not Bishop. It's something that begins with—" He broke off, darted across the office to the big safe where Herschman kept the exhibits in the case. He pulled out a small overnight case, upended it, looked at the two initials—"S. B."

"I knew there was something screwy about those initials, but at the time I couldn't say just what. Look!" He pointed to the "B." "Notice anything?"

Herschman peered closer. He even picked up a magnifying glass from his desk and played it upon the letter. "Yeah," he said. "It looks like—"

"Yeah. Like someone has tampered with the lettering. Made a B out of a P. It isn't Stanley Bishop. It's Stanley something-that-begins-with-P."

Herschman nodded. "You're right. The Sing Sing guard says Pennock. Stanley Pennock."

"What's his record?"

"He hasn't any himself. But his old man had. He was in Sing Sing five years, died there about eight months ago. His son used to come and see him. That's how the guard recognized the photograph. Stanley Bishop-Pennock's father was a chemist, and he got caught in a scheme for making sapphires and rubies in the laboratory and selling 'em as the real stuff. Emmanuel Pennock. They called him Manny, the guard said. The son came to see his father every month until the father died."

But again Spike broke in. "Manny," he said. "Manny. I wonder . . . Where's that letter?" He started scrambling through a file from the safe.

"What letter?"

"The one we found in Lina Lee's bag. The one that said— Here it is." He unfolded it and spread it out on the desk. He read aloud from it. "Met an interesting guy up here. Named Manny. Remember him? Well, you'll be sorry to know he died eight months ago. We got real friendly. He told me a lot about himself—and you. I'm wise to a lot of things I wasn't wise to ten years ago."

He replaced the letter in the folder. "Things are getting interesting. If I remember correctly, you said this Sam Hesketh who wrote this letter was sent up on a similar charge—selling imitation rubies and sapphires as the real thing."

Herschman nodded.

"And they both knew Lina Lee apparently. And now the son of one of 'em is all mixed up somehow in her murder. Got any ideas on the subject, Inspector?"

Herschman chewed his cigar thoughtfully. "A few."

"Such as?"

"Well, for one thing I think this Lina Lee was probably a no-good bitch."

"Precisely the term Stanley Bishop-Pennock used in his delirium, and I wouldn't be at all surprised if he were referring to Lina Lee. Personally I'm inclined to agree with both of you. Carry on."

"She was a no-good bitch, and she probably was in on some kind of shady racket. I looked up her salary with the Penton Press, and she was getting forty-five dollars a week. Now on forty-five dollars a week you don't keep up the kind of apartment she maintained, and you don't have a bank balance of more than four thousand dollars. She didn't get all that from her salary. She got it some other way."

"Such as?"

"I dunno. It's your turn."

"Well." Spike said, "refined blackmail is nice work if you can get it."

"Who'd she be blackmailing?"

"Penton—maybe."

"How?"

"Consider this—Philip Bridenthal told us that Penton was a 'very old friend' of his wife. Shortly after Penton pulls out of Bascombe & Rogers, Bridenthal starts putting up money for the Penton Press and has been doing it ever since. And all the time his wife has been going off to the Catskills for occasional week ends with Penton. That is, all the time except for the last two years.

"Lina Lee started to work for the Penton Press three years ago. Since then she has been the one who spent the occasional week ends with Penton at Fuzzy Top Lodge—not Violet Bridenthal."

"Sweet layout," Herschman pointed out. "Two dames and one man."

"A sweet layout for Lina Lee," Spike agreed. "When a man takes a woman on a week-end rendezvous, he's likely to get confidential with her. He is likely to confess, even boast perhaps, of previous pec-cadilloes. Maybe that's what Penton did. Maybe he confessed about Violet to Lina. Whatta sap!"

"Yeah. And she says to both of 'em—Penton and Mrs. Bridenthal—'Put up and shut up, or I'll tell Mr. Bridenthal.'"

"Precisely. And, if she ever told Bridenthal, both of 'em would be in the soup. A guy's not likely to keep on pouring out money to another guy who's finagling with his wife. He's even likely to get mad and kick his wife out entirely. Bridenthal looks like he might be that kind."

"All of which," Herschman pointed out, "would come in mighty handy in building up a murder charge against either Felix Penton or Violet Bridenthal or both of them in collusion."

"Mighty handy." Spike agreed. "Only where does Bishop come in?"
"I'll bite. Where?"

"Well . . ." Spike settled himself comfortably and lit a cigarette. "On the other hand, maybe it's something like this: This dame Lina Lee is a pretty slick one. But you don't get slick all of a sudden. It's a long process. And I imagine it started a long time ago with her. I imagine she pulled a slick one on this guy Sam. His letter has all the earmarks of a man who has a grudge and is going to get even."

"Maybe he did," Herschman suggested.

"Yeah, maybe he killed her. But that explanation's too easy. It leaves out all the queer finagling of Bishop. I prefer to think this guy Manny had something to do with it."

"He's been dead eight months. What's this, a ghost story?"

"Sure, he's dead, but his son isn't. Maybe the son was pretty much attached to his father. The Sing Sing guard said he came to see him every month. Maybe Manny, the father, before he died, told the son a lot about a lot of people—including Lina Lee. Maybe Lina Lee once pulled a slick one on Bishop's father, and the son was out to get her."

"And so he killed her."

"That would be a logical assumption if it weren't for those damn account books. There's some kind of a twist there—some . . ." Spike was groping. "Those account books—I mean Bishop secretly removing them, taking them to his house, all that sort of thing—just doesn't fit in with the nice, simple, melodramatic murder-for-r-r-revenge theory."

"No," Herschman agreed, "it don't. But maybe it wasn't that. Did you ever think that maybe Bishop was a slick one too? As slick as Lina Lee, and they were both working together on a slick proposition."

"That's an idea, too," Spike conceded. "You mean that whatever smart racket she was pulling, he was in on it with her. If that was the case, she got most of the gravy, judging from the comparative splendor of their establishments."

He thought the idea over for a few minutes. The more he thought about it, the more he thought of it. He nodded his head slowly. "Yeah. Suppose they're together on some scheme—Lina Lee and Bishop. Maybe it's not blackmail. Maybe they're milking money out of the Penton Press by way of phony bookkeeping, and he decides he's not getting his share. She's taking all the gravy. So just to check up on her he removes the books and goes over 'em himself. Finds out it's just as he thought. Gets mad and shoots her clean to hell, and—No, no, that won't do." He broke off irritably.

"Maybe—I imagine . . ." He was groping again. Then suddenly things cleared. "I know. It was like this. Bishop and Lina Lee were originally partners in crime. Then Lina Lee schemes her way into Penton's good graces—and incidentally into his bed—and decides she'll play a lone hand, and take all the gravy for herself. She has fixed the books so that if any question should come up, she could pretend to

be an innocent bystander, and the books themselves would speak out—and point the finger at Bishop. And just by way of a build-up, she goes to Penton and pretends to be suspicious of Bishop. Maybe he found this out and—" Spike broke off. "Got any report yet from the auditors?"

"Not yet. They're working now and will continue all day tomorrow and Monday."

"Maybe we could get a preliminary report." Spike reached for the telephone. In a few minutes he had the chief auditor on the wire.

"Of course we can't make a complete and authoritative report now, you understand. It will be several days before we're finished."

"Yeah, I understand that. But what are the indications at the present time?"

"More than indications. There's been a definite diversion of funds. The exact method we haven't discovered yet. It's something to do with the bills for manufacturing."

"Say that again," Spike demanded.

"I mean the diversion of funds seems definitely to have been through manipulation of manufacturing accounts."

When Spike hung up the phone, he relayed the conversation to Herschman. Both of them looked grave and thoughtful. Both of them were feeling sorry for Anne Penton.

* * *

Spike called at Polyclinic Hospital on Sunday morning.

"A little better," the doctor attending Stanley Bishop told him. He couldn't see any improvement himself, but then he was a detective, not a doctor. Bishop lay, eyes closed, unmoving, one hand hanging over the edge of the bed, limp, lifeless.

"He's been like that all the time," the plain-clothes man on duty told him. Then he added: "That dame was up here all the time yesterday."

"What did she do?"

"Nothing. Just sat, looking at him like she'd—well, sorta sicklike."

"Yeah, that's what I thought."

Spike waited a while, and presently Anne was there again, her arms full of flowers.

"I thought maybe he might—today . . ." She looked at the still figure on the bed, and her shoulders slumped in poignant disappointment. She laid the flowers untended on the dresser.

"The doctor says he's better," Spike told her. She raised grateful eyes to his—eyes heavy with sleeplessness and shadow.

"Could I talk to you—alone?" She looked significantly in the direction of the plain-clothes man.

At a nod from Spike the man left the room, closing the door be-

hind him. They were left alone, the two of them, he on one side of the bed, she on the other.

"Yes?" Spike said, waiting.

"You don't think, do you—he—that he did it?"

"I wouldn't be able to say that for sure—yet."

"But he didn't do it, I tell you. He didn't."

Spike only shrugged his shoulders.

"You're not going to arrest him, are you?"

"No telling."

"But you've got to believe me. He didn't do it." There was a tragic urgency in her voice.

"Why have I got to believe you?"

"Because I know."

"Yeah, but the Police Department doesn't know. The Police Department, unfortunately, can't just take the word of a pretty gal and let it go at that. The Police Department has to have proof."

"But I have p—" She broke off in the sudden confusion of one who has made a misstep.

"You have proof?"

"I—I didn't say that."

"Not quite—but almost. That's what you meant, though, wasn't it?"

"No—yes—I mean . . ." She was knotting her handkerchief fiercely into a ball.

"Perhaps you'd like to talk it over with the Inspector."

"No, no—I've said too—Let me alone."

* * *

It was Sunday in the Park, and Spike felt out of place. Everyone around him was having a good time. Kids playing ball. Nursemaids making eyes at the cop. Families with picnic lunches. At the Mall there was a band playing.

Spike didn't feel like a band. He felt lousy. He kept thinking of Anne Penton and the white, strained tragedy of her face when he left her beside Stanly Bishop's bed.

At the zoo he found a telephone booth and called up Cassie Framp. "I'll be sitting on a bench near the Eighty-fifth Street entrance. You'll recognize me because I won't have a white carnation in my buttonhole."

She came about half an hour later, placid and comforting.

"I feel lousy," he said:

"You look it. What's the matter—stomach or disposition?"

"Oh, my stomach's all right."

"That's good. I brought along some cookies. I was just in the middle of a batch when you called. That's why it took me so long. Here." She shoved a box toward him. "And get a couple of bottles of pop. I like strawberry."

And so when an itinerant dealer had supplied bottles and straws, they settled back comfortably, and Spike felt better. He grinned inwardly. What if some of the snooty society he went with—or even Herschman, for that matter—could see him now! Sitting on a park bench drinking strawberry pop and eating cookies with a placid middle-aged woman!

Cassie sighed contentedly. "Reminds me of old times. When Anne was just a little girl, I usta come down here and bring cookies and buy pop and we'd have a treat."

"Now that you mention it—that's what I wanted to talk to you about."

"Cookies and pop?"

"No—Anne Penton. What do you know about her?"

"What everybody that knows her knows—that she's a darling."

"She looks like one," he conceded, "but that's not what I mean. How long have you known her? Where'd you meet her? That sort of thing."

Cassie took another swig of strawberry pop and settled down to pleasant reminiscence. "It was right here in Central Park. I usta come here of an afternoon sometimes. She did too with her nurse. She was just a little thing. Only about five or six. We got acquainted. We've been acquainted ever since."

"How come you're living with her father's former secretary?"

"You mean Rowena? Well, sometimes Rowena would come to the Park with Anne instead of the nurse. I got to know her that way and by-and-by we took an apartment together, and we've been together ever since."

"Where does your husband come into the picture?"

"Mr. Framp? Oh, I married him back in 1929, and he moved right in with Rowena and me. He didn't last long though, poor man, not quite a year. Of course when he was alive we had a larger apartment. Mr. Framp never was one to be stingy with his money, and he left me real comfortable, so that Rowena and I get along pretty nice. I'm the domestic kind that likes housekeeping, and she's the offic kind."

"She looks hard to live with."

"You mustn't judge her by these last few days. She's been upset—terribly upset."

"I shouldn't wonder. But then she's been—upset as you say—most of her life, hasn't she—about Felix Penton?"

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, come off it, Cassie. You know what I mean. I mean that Rowena Asche has been in love with Felix Penton all her life. Hasn't she?"

"If you're so sure of yourself, why ask me?"

"How come Anne Penton lives in one place and her father in another? She seems passionately devoted to him."

"She is, but—"

"But he's not so devoted to her?"

"I didn't say that. What I mean is that—Well, her mother died when she was only five. She stayed on with her grandfather, old Josiah Penton, and when he died he left everything to her. The house is hers, you know."

"In that case I should think it would be big enough to include her father."

"I think he—prefers it where he is."

"I'm sure he does. Know anything about young Bishop?"

"Nothing except that Anne loves him."

"Yeah, I know that. Too bad."

"Why too bad?"

"I mean it's too bad when a gal's in love with a guy who isn't, after all, the prize package she thinks he is."

"You seem to be sort of—hinting that he's not—" she broke off.

"Exactly."

"What makes you think so?"

"Oh things we've found out ourselves. Things Felix Penton has told us."

"Felix Penton? What things?" The placidity had suddenly gone out of her voice.

"Things I can't discuss with you just now. But try and ease things to the girl a bit."

"What do you mean? What are you going to do to him?"

"I dunno—yet. I'm an old softie, Cassie. I'm not going to do anything until he has a chance to speak for himself. But God help him if he doesn't come through then, because otherwise things look black as hell for him."

Cassie crumbled a cookie and watched the pigeons eat it.

He walked her home to the apartment-house on East Eight-fifth, and then kept on until he came to Carl Schurz Park overlooking the East River waterfront. It was getting late, and the little stretch of greenness was quieter than Central Park with its teeming Sunday crowd.

He sat for a long time on a bench watching the slow barges on the river, thinking. Thinking of four women. Violet Bridenthal, so hard, so bright, so tense. Anne Penton, and the tragic urgency of her voice. Rowena Asche and a life of wasted devotion. Lina Lee—dead but somehow still on top of the heap.

And Felix Penton. Four women and Felix Penton.

Presently when it began to grow dark he rose and walked back toward the Second Avenue El. It was then that he encountered the

pushcart, and halted abruptly, held up by the sight of onions—small purple onions.

The pushcart proprietor was tired but affable. "The onions? Yes, yes," and he filled up a small bag. "Verra hard to get, thesa onions. From Italy. The leetel purple onions. Sweet an' a-strong. Only on the pusha cart. Verra hard to get."

CHAPTER VII

SPIKE waited. He spent all his time waiting and thinking—and trying to keep Herschman waiting and thinking too.

"But we've got to do something," the Inspector protested. "The newspapers are in a howl. We can't just sit around on our fannies. Look what mugs it makes of us."

"Yeah, but we'd be worse than mugs if we did anything else."

"I don't get you."

"Look, Inspector, Stanley Bishop is pretty vital to this case. He was there Friday night, the last night any one saw Lina Lee alive. There were two other people there—Felix Penton and Mrs. Bridenthal. Both of them have lied like hell. They've admitted it—when we caught 'em at it. Maybe they're still lying. But this much is sure, Stanley Bishop is in a position to tell the truth about what happened there on that Friday night. Maybe he won't do it. Maybe the truth is so damaging to him that he'll lie too. But we've got to give him a chance."

"But we've got enough evidence on him now."

"Yeah, I know. And the papers would love it. They'd run with rivers of tears for the poor defenseless fellow, unconscious in a hospital, unable to speak for himself, pounced upon, victimized by the bloodthirsty police department."

Spike reached for the telephone, called Polyclinic Hospital, and talked to the doctor, then reported to Herschman. "Doctor says he's coming along slowly. He's beginning to have moments of complete rationality. Now let's keep our shirts on. In the meantime . . ."

In the meantime they were not entirely without things to do. There were, for instance, the auditors to consult with.

"There has been a systematic looting of this company," the head accountant told them.

"How long has it been going on?"

"For the past three years. Before that time there is every evidence of bad management, but no actual discrepancies in the accounts. Carelessness to be sure. Not in the keeping of the books, but in the use of funds. Mr. Penton's expense accounts were enormous."

"I wouldn't be a bit surprised."

"But at least there was nothing irregular as far as the books show—up to three years ago. Since then it's a different story."

"Tell it to us."

"Well, at first the diversion of funds seemed to be through authors' royalty accounts. But that was apparently too difficult. Frankly, Penton Press was not a very successful firm, and the authors didn't have very large royalty accounts. Any funds snipped from such small accounts would be necessarily small themselves, in order not to arouse suspicion. About seven months ago the manufacturing accounts began to show apparent discrepancies. I say apparent, because it is impossible to determine absolutely."

"Why?"

"Fire and moving."

"What do you mean?"

"I talked to Miss Penton and to Miss Asche, and they tell me that the Penton Press has moved twice in the last three years. And each time they moved something got lost. Files, invoices, canceled checks. And then just several months ago there was a fire one evening in Mr. Bishop's office, and a lot of the manufacturing records got burned."

When the auditor had gone, Spike continued his thinking, doing it aloud for the benefit of the Inspector. "Yeah, crooked books for three years—ever since Lina Lee came to the firm and voluntarily took over the job of keeping 'em. Lina was beautiful and crooked. But she was still getting only chicken feed. Then along comes a guy who shows her how to grab a bigger handful. Bishop. For the last seven months, you'll note, the auditor says it's been through the manufacturing accounts that the funds have been diverted. And it's just seven or eight months ago that Bishop came to Penton Press. Maybe he already knew her—introduced through mutual friends in Sing Sing—Manny Pennock and Sam Hesketh. Anyway Bishop showed her a trick or two, and then she double-crossed him. She was taking all the swag. When thieves fall out . . ."

"So then he shot her and swiped the books to cover up."

"So maybe you're right."

"What do you mean, maybe?"

"Why, after he had swiped the books, did he go off and leave 'em? And if he was making a skip, why wait until Tuesday morning to do it, and why not skip some place farther than Hunter? And before he made the skip why did he go over and jimmy open the French doors of Felix Penton's apartment? And who put the electric light globe in the lamp on Felix Penton's desk?"

"Maybe he did."

Spike shook his head. "No. There are fingerprints on that bulb, but not his. I checked on that."

And Spike went back to his waiting and thinking.

It was four days—from Monday to Thursday—before the doctor at Polyclinic finally gave an all-clear sign. “He’s weak,” he warned them, “but we’ve given him stimulants for the ordeal. And his head is absolutely clear.”

Anne Penton was there, of course, when they arrived. She had been there ever since that morning when the ‘pushover for a loving and devoted couple’ had given her the open sesame. But never once had she been alone. Always there had been the plain-clothes man opposite.

Bishop was propped up in bed, looking very white and weak. But there was no sag to his jaw, and he seemed to accept their coming without explanation or protest.

Spike motioned the plain-clothes man and Anne Penton to leave the room. She started to protest. “Listen, sister,” he said not unkindly, “I may be a pushover, but I’m not a sap. See?”

Spike sat on one side of the bed and Herschman on the other. The day was warm with early June heat, and a heavy cloud of humidity seemed pressing down upon the tired streets outside. In the hospital room it was very quiet.

Stanley Bishop grinned. “Funny,” he said weakly. “Damned funny.”

“What?” Spike asked.

“You—that drunk, playing games in a taxicab. And you turn out to be a detective.”

“I know. Tough luck, isn’t it, Bishop? Or do you prefer to be called by your real name? You know—Pennock?”

The grin faded from his face, and a great weariness took its place. “So you found that out.”

“That and a lot more. Suppose you tell us about it?”

“About what?”

“About Friday night, May 27, in the office of the Penton Press.”

He smiled again, this time grimly. But he didn’t answer. He just didn’t answer. Neither that question nor any of the others that Spike and the Inspector put to him. “What happened . . . ? Why did the books . . . ? Did you know that Lina Lee . . . ? Where were you going when . . . ? If you meant to make a skip, why . . . ?”

They pelted on him one after another. And he just lay there, his jaw set, while beads of sweat gathered on his forehead and upper lip. Presently he began to look a little ashen. Spike put out a hand and felt his pulse. It was pounding.

He rose. “It’s no use, Inspector.” Then to the man on the bed: “You know, Bishop, don’t you, that you’re in a mighty tight spot?”

“I know.” Very quietly.

“And you’re sure there’s nothing you want to say?”

“Nothing.”

“You know, of course, that we can arrest you for murder.”

“I know.”

"Well then—" Spike paused. Then quickly he shot the question.
"Did you or didn't you murder Lina Lee?"

But Bishop only smiled wryly. Then he closed his eyes wearily,
and this time when he spoke his voice was very weak.

"Aren't you the ones—who are supposed to furnish the answer to
that question—not me?"

Anne Penton was waiting for them in the anteroom down the cor-
ridor. As they passed, she darted out and grabbed Spike's arm.

"Now you know, don't you?" she demanded breathlessly.

"Know what?"

"That he had nothing to do with it."

"What makes you so sure?"

"But he told you. You must believe him."

Spike hesitated. "He told us—nothing."

"What do you mean?"

"Just that. Nothing."

"But—but I don't understand."

"Your precious Mr. Bishop, Miss Penton, won't talk."

"But he must talk. He must clear himself."

"If he can."

"But he can. He can. He doesn't know anything about it. He wasn't
there even."

"Were you?" He shot the question at her.

She blinked. It was very quiet in the corridor with only the occa-
sional soft tread of a nurse passing by.

"Were you?"

She didn't say anything. Thought and feeling seemed suddenly
suspended by the thrust of that insistent question.

"Because if you were," Spike went on relentlessly, "you'd better
spit it out in papa's hand. Bishop won't. And under the circumstances
his silence is pretty incriminating." He paused. "Well, how about it?"

She took a deep breath. "All—all right." She looked around her.
"But not here."

"O. K. We'll go down to Headquarters."

In Herschman's office the three of them sat down around the big
desk in the center of the room, and Spike offered her his cigarette
case. She shook her head in refusal.

"Good for the nerves," he urged. He could see the tense movements
of her hands as she twisted a ring on her little finger. But she still re-
fused. "All right, then, go ahead."

"Well—you see," she began hesitantly, "the reason I know Mr.
Bishop had nothing to do with it was because I was there—in the office
—that night."

"What night?"

"Friday night."

"You mean you're going to give us an eyewitness account of the murder?"

"No, not quite that. It was like this. Mr. Bishop was away all day Friday, down in Camden, and I was a little late getting through. Nearly everyone had left. There was just Miss Lee and the office boy, Freddie, and myself. I closed up my desk and went out to the ladies' room. It's down the corridor and across the hall. I was very hot and tired, so I spent quite a lot of time there. I took off my blouse and washed my face and neck and arms, and put on fresh powder and fixed my hair. I must have been in there fifteen or twenty minutes. I'm not sure.

"When I went back to the office, it seemed to be empty. I decided I must be the last one to leave so I went around closing windows. I closed the windows in the outer office and in Mr. Bishop's office and in the cashier's cage, and then—" She broke off, hesitated, nervously herself to go on. "Then I went into my father's office."

"Yes?"

"She was there."

"Miss Lee, you mean?"

"Yes."

"Dead or alive?"

"Dead."

"How did you know?"

"She—she was crumpled up—halfway under the desk. I—I shook her, spoke to her. I couldn't get any response. And I couldn't get any pulse. I saw the wound. So—so I knew she was dead."

"So what did you do?"

"I—nothing."

"Nothing? That's pretty strange. You come upon the dead body of your father's secretary in your father's office—and you do nothing."

"I—I was frightened."

"What of?"

"I—oh, I don't know. Just frightened."

"In cases like that the police can be very comforting," he reminded her. "The telephone was working, wasn't it?"

"Yes—I guess so—I don't know. I didn't try."

"Well then, what *did* you do?"

"I—just left the office and locked the door behind me."

"And said nothing to anyone?"

"No. Nothing—to anybody. Until—until Monday."

"And then you told—"

"Mr. Bishop."

"Why didn't you tell your father?"

"Because I—" She fumbled. "He wasn't here to tell."

"He was in New York until Saturday afternoon. We have that

on his own testimony and the evidence of the workers at the garage where he keeps his car. Why didn't you tell him?"

"I tried to—later. I mean I went to his apartment twice on Saturday night and again on Sunday. He wasn't there, of course. Then I got panicky. I had to tell someone. I had to have some help. I couldn't stand it any longer alone."

"And so you told Mr. Bishop. When?"

"Monday. I had to find my father. So I got Mr. Bishop to go there to his apartment."

"Do you have a key to your father's apartment?"

"No."

"Go on."

"I thought maybe—he was there—that he—"

"You mean you thought maybe your father had murdered Miss Lee and then had gone home to his apartment and committed suicide. Go on."

"No, no. I didn't think anything of the kind."

"Then why did you have Stanley Bishop go up the fire escape in the rear and jimmy open the French doors onto the terrace?"

"How—how did you know that?"

"Never mind how. That's what happened, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"And what did he find?"

"Nothing. Father wasn't there."

"So then what?"

"So then I tried to think where he might have gone. I had telephoned everyone I knew. And then I remembered that once I had heard him talking of a place up in the Catskills that he went to sometimes. A place with a funny name. Fuzzy Top Lodge. I thought maybe—I didn't know—it wouldn't hurt to try—"

"And so at your request Mr. Bishop essayed a trip to Fuzzy Top Lodge to find your father."

"Yes."

Spike paused, thoughtful—and skeptical. Something of his doubt must have showed in his face, for the girl went on in fierce urgency.

"So you see you must believe me. It's true what I've said. Stan—Mr. Bishop had nothing to do with it. He couldn't have. He was miles away. It must have been five-thirty or perhaps a quarter to six when I—I found Miss Lee—dead. And he was on the train. He never left Philadelphia until five-four. I told you I had proof."

Spike shook his head, spoke slowly. "But it's not quite good enough, Miss Penton."

"What do you mean?"

"We have only your word for all of this—the word of a woman

who is in love with Bishop. Maybe you're lying about being there."

"But I tell you I'm not lying. I'm not. You've got to believe me."

"We've only got to believe what is supported by evidence."

"But I was there—in that very room—I saw with my own eyes . . ."

Her voice was rising now, shrill, with a touch of hysteria.

"You have nothing to prove it."

"But I have something to—" She broke off suddenly, the sentence choked in her throat.

"Oh so you do have something to prove you were there?"

"Y—yes."

"What?"

"I—I can't—tell you."

"Why?"

"Because—I—" She was sitting facing the door. Now suddenly she sprang from her chair. "Father!"

Spike and the Inspector turned. Felix Penton was standing in the doorway. His brows were black with anger.

"Anne, what are you doing here? Didn't I tell you—"

"Father!" She darted toward him, grabbed his arm. "Father, I must talk to you."

"All right, come along."

"No. Now—here."

"I'll take you home."

"No—here—alone." She shot an appealing look at Spike.

"If you like," he said, and indicated the office with a generous gesture. He and Herschman withdrew and closed the door behind them.

They waited in the outer office. They waited fifteen minutes. Then half an hour. At last the door burst open, and Felix Penton came out alone. He never looked at them as he crossed the outer office and slammed the door behind him.

She was sitting there in the big chair beside Herschman's desk. She rose as Spike and the Inspector came in. She was very pale and all the strength seemed gone from her. She looked weary—terribly weary, spent, done in.

"Well?" Spike's voice was not unkind.

"I've—nothing more to say—that I haven't already said."

Spike nodded. "I know. You don't need to say it, sister. You're in a tight spot, aren't you? This proof you have—whatever it is—if you don't produce it, you save your father's neck. If you do produce it, you save Bishop's. Something like that, isn't it?"

For a moment she just stood there looking at him, saying nothing. Then very quietly she sank to the floor in a dead faint.

CHAPTER VIII

"MAYBE," said Herschman, "we're sweating all for nothing."

It was Friday morning, and they were in the Inspector's office. "We're so concerned with Bishop and Penton, we keep forgetting about Sam Hesketh."

"I thought of that, too," Spike admitted. "What the hell's the Missing Persons Bureau doing about it?"

"All the routine stuff. They've circulated photographs, notified all railroads, bus companies, steamship lines. They have special men working the city in places where ex-convicts are likely to—"

Herschman broke off as a clerk from the outer office appeared in the doorway. He seemed excited. "Inspector, there's a man here to see you. He says his name is Sam Hesketh."

"Huh?" Herschman gaped.

"Sam Hesketh." The clerk had to repeat it to pierce through the Inspector's incredulous astonishment.

Spike burst out laughing. "This is good—just like in the movies or a detective story. The right man turning up at just the right moment."

"Show him in," Herschman said.

The photograph of Sam Hesketh which the Police Department had in its files didn't do him justice. Passport and police photographers never bring out the best in a face. And Sam Hesketh's was hard—but not particularly bad. There were deeply graven lines from nose to chin, and his mouth didn't move much when he talked, and his eyes were cautious, wary, appraising. Prison eyes. A prison mouth, twisted now in a wry, sardonic smile as he seated himself in a chair beside Herschman's desk.

"I see by the papers," he said in a curiously flat voice, "that my former wife's been murdered."

"Your wi—" Herschman caught himself up short. Mustn't let this fellow see that the Police Department didn't know everything. "Yeah," he said, trying to be as cool and unemotional as Hesketh. "And we've been looking for you."

"I thought you probably would be. That's why I came."

"Pretty slow about it, weren't you?"

"Yeah. But yesterday was the first time I'd read a paper since I left the dear old home town up the river."

"What's the matter? Hiding out?"

"No. Just taking a rest. Ten years in Sing Sing sort of get on your nerves. I was on a West Indies cruise. SS *Monarch* of the Barber line. Left New York May 19. That's just three weeks ago yesterday. Got back last night. All under the name of George Addison. Better take some notes so that you can check back on me."

"Why'd you change your name?"

"When you're an ex-convict, you never know when you might meet up with somebody who knew you when. A change of name just makes things easier."

"Well, from now on it's Hesketh."

"O. K. But if you have occasion to call me at my hotel better ask for George Addison. That's the way I'm registered."

"What's your hotel?"

"The Waldorf-Astoria."

"The Wal—" Again Herschman found himself gaping. His eyes traveled over Hesketh, noting his shoes, his clothes. They didn't look like the shoes and clothes handed out to released convicts. They were well made, expensive-looking.

Hesketh pulled cigars from his pocket and offered them to Spike and the Inspector, took one himself. Corona-Coronas, the three-for-a-dollar size. And he was staying at the Waldorf-Astoria!

"Little puzzled, ain't you, Inspector?" Hesketh put into words what was already written on Herschman's face. "Maybe I better start taking down my back hair. That's what I came here for."

He lit his cigar and settled back in his chair. "But don't mistake me. I'm not being a Boy Scout. I'm just beating you to the draw. I'm going to start telling you things before you start telling me things. I'm an ex-convict. Everything I do or say will be suspect. I get out of prison one week, and my ex-wife gets murdered the next week. And, if you knew all the circumstances, you'd be a fool not to suspect me like all hell."

"What circumstances?"

"It's a long story."

"We've got lots of time."

"O. K." He stretched out his feet comfortably and blew a cloud of smoke into the air. "I met Lina Lee fourteen years ago and I fell for her like a ton of lead. I was a salesman for a Maiden Lane jewelry firm. She was a stenographer. We got married.

"She had big ideas. I didn't. My salary was fair enough. We could get along easy, comfortable. But that wasn't good enough for her. She said I should go in business for myself. I had to laugh. Going into the jewelry business takes money. But that didn't seem to faze her.

"She said she had 'connections.' One of 'em made a proposition to me. He was a designer named Raleigh. A good one, too. I could see that from the samples of his stuff he showed. He used mostly rubies and sapphires, and he got some wonderful effects. But queer—different from what was going good in the trade just then. He needed a good salesman to put his line over, and I was a good salesman.

"And I put it over." Hesketh paused, and the wryness of his smile deepened with recollection. "God, what a sap! I mean I was the sap. Not him. But I didn't find that out until later—when they arrested me

for selling fake jewelry. Good reason why the guy used so many rubies and sapphires. Dead ringers for the real thing can be made in the laboratory, and only an expert can tell the difference. And I wasn't an expert. I was just a salesman—and a goddam sap.

"They tried me, of course. I got up in court and told my story. Raleigh by that time had disappeared. I had no idea where he was or where the stuff had been made. I didn't know when I was selling it that it was fake. That was my story, and I told it in court, and it was God's truth, but I didn't have a shred of evidence to back it up.

"They asked me how I'd gotten teamed up with Raleigh, and that's where they put me on the spot. If I'd told the truth it would have implicated my wife. And I was noble. My wife wasn't going to be dragged in. I wasn't on to her then. I thought she'd been played for a sucker just like me. So I lied. I lied like hell. They believed the lies, but they didn't believe the truth. I got thirteen years."

He took a long, contemplative puff at his cigar. "You learn a lot of things in prison. Surprising how you get around, meet people—I met a guy named Manny. Manny Pennock. He'd been a chemist. Then he started in making artificial rubies and sapphires in his laboratory. We found out it was a small world. He'd known my wife. Raleigh too. They'd bought lots of stuff from him.

"It's no crime to sell synthetic jewels if you sell 'em as synthetic. It's when you begin palming 'em off as the real thing, taking the price the real stuff fetches, that you get into deep water. But Pennock didn't do that. He was a just naturally on-the-level guy, and he sort of took it for granted that other people were too.

"So he was kind of surprised when he got arrested. He told 'em he could explain everything. Just give him time to get a lawyer and get in touch with Lina and Raleigh. Well, he got the lawyer all right, but he didn't get Lina and Raleigh. They were a couple of slick ones. They'd pulled out, and they'd covered their tracks—and left Pennock holding the bag. He got thirteen years, just like me. We got real well acquainted, having mutual friends, you might say. I was all broke up when he died. That was about eight, nine months ago. Naturally when I got out of prison, I looked up Lina and—"

"Just a minute," Spike put in. "You say 'after' you got out of prison?"

"Well, as a matter of fact I wrote her a letter the week before."

"How'd you know where to find her? I thought you said she divorced you."

"She had. Just a year after I went up. I got official notification. She took back her maiden name. After that I lost track of her completely. Never heard from her. It was through Pennock that I found out where she was."

"How'd he know? I thought you said he couldn't find her when he needed her."

"He couldn't. But he had a son. Just a kid when Pennock went in seven years ago. But kids grow up. This one did. Name's Stanley. His mother died a little while after his father was convicted. He didn't have anyone in the world but his father. And he adored him. He knew the whole story. When he got old enough, he said he was out to get two people—Lina Lee and Raleigh.

"Well he caught up with 'em finally. Or at least with Lina. She and Raleigh had lived together for three or four years after I got sent up—she didn't wait for a divorce for that—and then he'd died. When young Stan Pennock caught up with her, she was working at Penton Press. Manny told me about it, and I put the address down for future reference. Does that answer your question?"

Spike nodded. "Yeah. Go ahead."

"So I wrote her a letter and told her I'd be seein' her, and I did. I got out on Monday, May 16, and by Wednesday I'd located her home address, and I went to see her. I didn't think she'd want me mixing up in her business life. And anyway I wanted a nice quiet talk with her. She wasn't keen about the idea, but we had it anyway."

He stopped, sat quietly, puffing complacently. "Well," he said, "what are you waiting for? Why don't you accuse me of murdering her? Isn't the setup good enough for you? Wronged husband—ten years in Sing Sing because he took the rap for a faithless dame—revenge at last. Ain't that good enough for you?"

"Perfect," Spike said. "Did you do it? Did you murder Lina Lee?"

Hesketh grinned. "Sorry if I look like that kind of a sap. Why should I kill a goose about to lay a golden egg?"

"What do you mean?"

"Look—I went down to her apartment on lower Fifth Avenue. Pretty swanky place. It didn't take me more than about fifteen minutes to size up the situation. Here was Lina living like a queen on the salary of a secretary. It didn't make sense—unless you knew Lina. And by that time I did.

"She had a pretty soft layout there. I suggested that we share it. I don't mean as man and wife. I was through with her as far as that went. But I could use some of the swag, whatever it was. She didn't like the idea, so I put on the heat. I knew things I hadn't known ten years ago. I knew all the things Manny had told me about her, and I had her in a spot. Finally she got reasonable.

"Anyway she told me to be reasonable. Said she had a guy on the string she'd been playing for chicken feed for a long time and she was getting tired of it. Said she was going to pull something big, and if I'd sit tight she'd cut me in. I asked her what she meant by something big. She didn't go into details, but she mentioned fifty grand."

Spike's glance crossed Herschman's. He was wondering if the sum of fifty thousand dollars evoked the same thought in the Inspector's

mind. That morning more than a week ago up at Philip Bridenthal's. *Why only last week Penton wants me to pull in another \$50,000.* 'Only last week' would be some time soon after the middle of May. Some time soon after Lina Lee met up with her discarded husband.

"Tell me something," Spike broke in. "Who was the guy she said she'd been playing for chicken feed?"

"I dunno. I tried to find out, but she wouldn't bite. Lina was no sucker."

"Did she say anything about her employer, Felix Penton?"

"No."

"Anything about a fellow named Stanley Bishop?"

"She didn't. But I brought up the subject. I told her that Bishop was really Pennock's son and he was out to get her."

"And what did she say?"

"That she'd get him first."

"So she didn't give you any idea where the fifty grand was coming from?"

"No. It was pennies from Heaven as far as I was concerned, so why should I worry? I told her I'd take something on account though."

"You look like you got it."

"I did."

"How much?"

"She didn't have any cash on her just then. At least not as much as I wanted. So I told her I'd take payment in kind. She was dressing up for a party and she was flashing some pretty nifty jewelry. She gave me this—and its mate." He took an earring from his pocket and shoved it across the desk. "I sold the mate and used the money. It's breaking my heart to turn this back to you now, but I'm saving my own neck. I had a swindling rap hung on me once, and I don't aim to have a murder charge hung on me now."

Spike reached for the earring and examined it carefully. "Pretty nifty," he said.

"Nifty? You don't know the half of it, brother. You should of seen the necklace that went with it. It was a set. Necklace and earrings."

"Did you tell her you intended going on a cruise?"

"Sure. I told her I'd give her a couple or three weeks to work in, and then I'd be back to collect."

"Did she know when you left on the cruise?"

"Sure. Came down to see me off."

"Did she know when you intended returning?"

"How could she? I wasn't sure myself. I just told her I'd be back in two or three weeks. Her getting bumped off sure is a tough break for me."

"It wouldn't have done you any good if she hadn't got bumped off."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, Hesketh, that you're still a sap. You didn't learn as much in the college up the river as you think. Lina Lee was working to collect fifty grand all right, but you weren't going to get any of it. She was planning to run out on somebody, and I think it probably was you. She had a one-way steamship ticket for South America, sailing on May 30. That was more than a week ago."

Hot, frustrated anger rose in Hesketh's throat, and he muttered choice gutter epithets. But Spike wasn't listening to him. He was looking again at the earring in his hand. A single emerald, catching and reflecting the light in flawless green beauty in a strange and intricate setting of old Italian gold—just like the emerald necklace that Anne Penton had worn that first Monday night in the taxi.

* * *

Spike waited until after eight o'clock. He knew she wouldn't be home before then. Eight o'clock was the deadline for visitors at the hospital.

"And if you don't mind," he told Herschman, "I think I'll go alone."

The house where she lived on East Eighty-fifth street was a gloomy old place. It was hard to imagine a girl so vivid and alive as Anne Penton, living there alone with only servants. A maid answered the door, showed him to the drawing room, summoned her mistress.

Spike made polite conversation asking about Bishop.

"He's better," she said. Her voice was terribly tired, and the shadows under her eyes had deepened. "But he won't talk—even to me. At least not about anything that matters. If I could only be alone with him for a little while . . ." She looked appealing, imploring.

But Spike shook his head. "Nothing doing. Maybe I was a sap for even letting you know where he was."

She smiled slightly. "You're a funny kind of a sap, you know. I can't make you out."

"I know. I'm an enigmatic personality."

"The first time I saw you, you were nothing but a drunken playboy, and then overnight you turned into a deadly serious, perfectly sober detective."

"Just versatile. That's me."

"You've beaten me down, harassed me, tortured me almost. You suspect the man I love of murder. You suspect my father of murder. Maybe you suspect me of murder. And yet you're . . ." She paused, groping for the right word.

"I'm just a sap. But I didn't come here to discuss me with you."

She sighed heavily. "All right, go ahead. What do you want?"

"I want to know where you got the emerald necklace you were wearing the night I first stumbled into the cab with you and Bishop."

She looked surprised. "What's that got to do with it?"

"I'll decide that, not you. Just answer the question. Where'd you get the necklace?"

"It's mine. It belonged to my mother before me. It was her engagement present from Father."

"Yeah. But where did you get it?"

"If you'll pardon my saying so, I really don't think it's any business of yours, but since you insist I'll tell you. I got it for my twenty-first birthday. It had always been promised to me for my twenty-first birthday, and that's when I got it."

"When was that?"

"Monday, May 30. It was Memorial Day."

"Who gave it to you?"

"Why my father, of course. Who else? He promised them to me years ago when I was a little girl."

"Them?"

"I mean—it," she corrected lamely.

"And I suppose on the morning of your birthday your Father appeared and clasped the necklace around your neck and murmured loving words and birthday greetings?"

"No—no, it wasn't quite that way. Father wasn't here on my birthday. You know that. He went up to the Catskills. Saturday afternoon before he left, he came around here, but I was out. So he left the gift and a note with the maid. She gave it to me Monday morning."

"You have the note?"

"Yes."

"May I see it?"

"It's a personal note to me, and it's no—"

"I know, I know. It's no business of mine. Come on—give."

"I'll have to get it from my bedroom." She rose resentfully, reluctantly, and left the room. She was back in a few moments with the note. It smelled faintly of perfume as if it had been kept in a bureau drawer.

"My own dear Daughter—Here is your dear mother's necklace that you have always known would some day be yours. I clasped it around her lovely throat that night many years ago when we first announced our engagement. I wish I could be here to clasp it around your throat—just as lovely and just as dear—on your birthday, but I can't arrange to be in town, much as I would like to. Happy birthday, my dear little Anne, from your devoted—Father."

Spike folded the note and handed it back. "A little while ago, Miss Penton," he went on, "you inadvertently referred to the jewels you were to receive from your mother as 'them.' Perhaps you were referring to a necklace and earrings."

For a moment she made no answer. When she spoke her voice was low, reluctant. "Yes. Yes—there were earrings originally. But Father

was forced once when he was very hard up to sell the earrings."

"How do you know that?"

"How should I know it? He told me so."

"When?"

"Just a little while ago."

"When, more specifically?"

"Just—just this week?"

"After he came back from the Catskills?"

"Yes. I asked him. I knew that originally the set had earrings."

"If your father was very hard up, why couldn't he get money from your grandfather?"

"My grandfather and my father were—they didn't get along."

"Why?"

"Grandfather didn't—he didn't understand Father. He didn't know how to handle him."

"You are, I understand, the sole heir of your grandfather?"

"Yes."

"That makes you a rich gal, doesn't it?"

"Not rich really. Grandfather lost an awful lot in the crash. But I'm comfortable."

"So that if your father was ever to be hard up again it wouldn't be necessary for him to hock jewelry. He could always get money from you."

"Yes, he could—now."

"Now? Why not before?"

"Because under the terms of Grandfather's will I didn't get control until my twenty-first birthday. Before that I was under the guardianship of the executor of the will, an old business associate of Grandfather's."

"But prior to your twenty-first birthday you could get some money?"

"Yes. For the maintenance of the house and my own personal expenses."

"But you couldn't get any considerable lump sum?"

"Not unless I could convince the executor."

"And did you ever try to convince him?"

"My private affairs seem to interest you greatly."

"They do. I'll be more specific. Did you ever try to get \$50,000 from your guardian-executor prior to your twenty-first birthday?"

"Why—why no."

"That, I suspect, is a lie. If you want to lie convincingly, don't preface your remarks with 'Why' and then hesitate. So you did try to get \$50,000 from your guardian?"

"I didn't say that."

"I know you didn't. I said it."

"But it's not true."

"We won't argue the matter. I'll just tell you. Your father came to you some time recently, say some time after the nineteenth of May, and asked you to get \$50,000 from your guardian and hand over to him. For the Penton Press, he said. And you tried to do it. And you didn't have any luck. And you told him just to wait a bit until after Monday, May 30, and then you could take things in your own hands. But he said he couldn't wait. That he had to have the money and have it quick.

"And another thing—your father doesn't want you to marry Bishop. A husband with a head on his shoulders might keep Felix Penton from getting his hooks into what money your grandfather left you. A passionately devoted daughter would be more likely to shell out than a woman married to a guy—"

"Mr. Tracy, this isn't Police Headquarters." Her face under the impact of his words was white. She rose from her chair. "This is my own home, and I don't have to stand for—"

"Skip it. Whatever you say you'll probably be lying your soul to hell. I didn't ask you any questions. I just told you. I told you what you know is true. That's why you're so damn mad. People always get mad when they find out someone else has found out what they've tried to conceal. They get mad or they get scared. Well, you're both. You're scared as hell."

He picked up his hat. His right hand sought his inner breast pocket, fingering something in tissue paper. Then he brought it out.

"Here," he said and thrust it into her hand. "Here's one of your earings. I'll try and get the other one back for you."

She looked at the jewel gleaming in the palm of her hand. "Wh—where did you get it?"

He smiled wryly. "I ought to tell you. I ought to tell you a few more plain truths. But I'm such a goddam sap I won't."

CHAPTER IX

"FELIX PENTON'S a louse!" Spike jammed his hands in his pockets and sucked viciously on a pipe. For a change they were in his apartment, not at Headquarters.

"Maybe," Herschman agreed, "but that's not a criminal offense. You have to have more than that to charge a man with murder."

"Well, what have we got?" He surveyed the situation briefly. "If Anne Penton's telling the truth, Lina Lee was killed some time around five-thirty or six, Friday evening, May 27. Felix Penton says he was home all day Friday in bed. Didn't leave his apartment until after dinner at night to come down to the Penton Press at nine-ten. Have you checked back on that?"

"Sure. Not that it did us much good. Penton has a maid who comes in by the day. Comes in in the morning and cleans up. He takes his meals out. Sometimes he has 'em sent up from a restaurant. We checked with the restaurants in the district and finally found one that said yes they frequently delivered meals to Mr. Penton's apartment. They delivered dinner there on Friday, May 27. Penton telephoned about seven-fifteen, and they sent a waiter right over. The waiter said Penton was dressed. At eight-thirty the waiter called for the dishes. Penton was just going out.

"Then one of our men talked to Penton's maid, and she said that on Friday morning she came in about ten and Mr. Penton was in bed. She cleaned the apartment, left about twelve, and didn't come back until Saturday morning at the same time. While she was cleaning Saturday morning, the telephone rang, and she answered it. It was a woman's voice asking for Penton. He took the call in his bedroom and shortly after that he went out. She didn't know who the woman was. He was still gone when she left at about twelve."

"In other words we have nobody's word but Penton's that he was home between five and six Friday evening?"

"That's right."

"And if you ask me, his word's worth two cents in Confederate money. First of all he lied about Mrs. Bridenthal being down at the office on Friday night. Then when he found out that we probably were way ahead of him, he puts on a big act, confesses he was lying, but says it was to save a woman's honor. Honor hell! What about Stanley Bishop's honor?"

"All right, I'll bite. What about it?"

"Look—Penton says that Lina Lee told him that she thought Bishop was crooked. Penton tells us that. Because there's no one else to tell it. And there's no one else to confirm or disprove it. Lina Lee's dead. But quite gratuitously he slings this insinuation at Bishop at a time when Bishop's hardly in a spot to stand gratuitous insinuations."

"Maybe she did tell him that."

"Sure, maybe she did. As soon as Hesketh put her wise to who Bishop was, as soon as she found out that he was Pennock's son and out to get her, she decided to start throwing monkey wrenches into his scheme. She goes to Penton and says she thinks Bishop's crooked. But does Penton have to spill it—to us, the police—about the guy his daughter's in love with?"

"Well," Herschman conceded, "he isn't what you'd call just a pal as far as Bishop's concerned."

"You're damn' well right he isn't. As a matter of fact he may be just plain rat as far as Bishop's concerned."

"What do you mean?"

"Did it ever occur to you that if Felix Penton killed Lina Lee him-

self, one of the first things he would try to do is to divert suspicion elsewhere."

"But why pick on Bishop?"

"Maybe Lina Lee did tell him something about Bishop. Maybe she told him Bishop was the son of a convict. A convict's son isn't a bad person to pin a murder on—if you can."

"But all this isn't getting us any place," Herschman protested. "So far, there's nothing we can act on. All you're doing is just sitting around on your can and making up theories."

"You forget that emerald necklace. On May 18 that necklace was in the possession of Lina Lee. On May 28, one day after she is murdered, it is in the possession of Felix Penton. He delivers it to the home of his daughter that very afternoon as a birthday gift. What I want to know is how'd he get it—and when?"

"Don't you want to know how she got it? I mean Lina Lee."

"That's too easy. There isn't a doubt in my mind that she was his mistress. Remember the kid in the store up at Hunter said she'd come up there with him several times. She told Hesketh she had a guy on the string she was playing for chicken feed. I suppose she considered an emerald necklace and earrings part of the chicken feed.

"Oh don't mistake me. If Penton wants to have a mistress, why that's just dandy with me, so long as he doesn't pick out someone I've already got a lien on. If he wants to give her emeralds and diamonds and what not, it's still O.K. with me. But does he have to take the jewels of his dead wife, jewels that he has promised for years to his daughter, and hand 'em over to a trollop?"

"Yeah," Herschman agreed, "he is a louse."

"The trouble is, he's so damn charming when he wants to be, and so disarming. He even has a guy he's making a mug and a cuckold out of admitting it."

"What do you mean?"

"Philip Bridenthal. How'd Violet Bridenthal know how to find Felix Penton at Fuzzy Top Lodge? Because she'd been up there with him before. And not just to play tiddlywinks."

"O. K.—but what are you going to do about it? All you're doing now is talking."

"Yeah, and I'm going to do some more talking—now." He reached for the telephone, dialed a number. "While I'm good and hot," he added as he waited.

"What do you mean?"

"I'm calling Felix Penton. Don't mistake me though. I'm going to be just as charming as he is—on the outside."

And he was. The invitation to drop over to the apartment for a little while was so casual, so amiable, so irresistible. And Felix Penton didn't resist. He was there inside half an hour—charming, affable, completely

at ease. So was Spike. Only the Inspector was a discordant note.

Police colleges teach marksmanship, traffic management, the habits of sneak thieves, pick-pockets, arsonists, identification of footprints and automobile tire treads—but not charm. Herschman was fidgety. Pug brought in tall, cool highballs and passed cigars.

"Hope you don't mind, Penton," Spike was saying, as he caressed a frosty glass at his elbow, "the—shall we say the informality."

Penton surveyed his drink approvingly and smiled. "I approve of it. With all due respect to you, Inspector, this has a slight edge on Police Headquarters for comfort," and he lay back in an easy chair and exhaled a long cloud of smoke.

Spike watched the smoke drift lazily in the warm night air. "There's one item that we've come across in our investigation that's a bit puzzling. Perhaps you will help us."

"If I can."

"It's about that emerald necklace of your daughter's." Spike appeared to be following the drifting smoke, but in reality his eyes were on Penton. They gleaned small reward for their watchfulness. The man never moved a muscle, or changed a line of his expression. That alone perhaps might be significant.

"You mean the one I gave her for her birthday?" Penton asked easily.

"That's it. Do you mind, Penton, if I—" He hesitated as one seeking tact in a touchy situation. Then he went on with sudden disarming frankness. "If I ask you to help us check up on a matter that perhaps may be pretty personal as far as you are concerned?"

"Not at all. Go ahead."

"Well then, here it is. We have reason to believe that that emerald necklace which your daughter now has, was at one time in the possession of Miss Lee. Is that true?"

Penton nodded. "I gave it to her some time in the early part of May. I don't remember the date exactly. Being my secretary, Miss Lee often handled personal matters for me. And I wanted the necklace cleaned because I was going to give it to my daughter on her birthday."

"And did she have it cleaned?"

"Yes, of course."

"And when did you get it back from her?"

"Well, let me see—some time just before she was killed."

"She was killed on Friday, May 27. Did she give the necklace back to you on Friday?"

"No, it wasn't on Friday. I wasn't in the office Friday. It must have been before that."

"How long before? Try and fix the time more exactly."

"Let me see. On Thursday I was at the office all day. It might have been—I know. Now I remember. It was Wednesday."

"When on Wednesday?"

"Right after lunch."

"How do you fix the time so exactly?"

"I remember now that I got back from lunch and Miss Lee wasn't there, and I was a little impatient, because there was some dictating I wanted to get done. She came in around two o'clock and said she was sorry she was late, but that she had to pick up the necklace in her noon hour."

"And she gave it to you then?"

"Yes."

"And what did you do with it?"

"Put it in my pocket, I suppose. I must have. I took it home with me Wednesday night."

"And when did you give it to your daughter?"

"I took it over to her house on Saturday afternoon. She wasn't home so I left it there with a note."

"So that from two o'clock on Wednesday until Saturday afternoon, the necklace was continuously in your possession."

"Yes, that's right."

"Pug," Spike called to the man in the kitchen, "let's have another round of drinks."

He waited until Pug had poured the drinks and retired before he went on. "You've been very helpful, Mr. Penton, but there's just one thing more that's still puzzling us. We understand that originally the necklace was part of a set—necklace and earrings. Where are the earrings now?"

Penton sighed, puffing out the air in a long exhale. He smiled wryly. "I was afraid you were going to bring that up." But he didn't seem troubled.

"Why afraid?"

"Oh, don't mistake me. It's just that—Well, she's dead now, and it's hard to tell on a dead person. Particularly a woman."

"You mean Miss Lee?"

"Of course."

"She had the earrings?"

"She took the earrings."

"You mean she stole them?"

"I—I don't like to put it that way. But I suppose that's what it amounts to."

"Explain it. We're all in the dark."

"Well, originally I gave Miss Lee the necklace and earrings to be cleaned. She brought back only the necklace."

"What explanation did she give—if any?"

"Oh she explained it all right. My God, yes!" Penton looked harassed at the memory. "She lived high. She had debts. They were catching

up with her faster than she could maneuver. A particularly unpleasant situation with creditors arose just about the time I turned the jewels over to her for cleaning.

"She confessed the temptation was too much. She hocked the earrings and shooed the wolf from the door. She thought I'd never find out about it. She knew my daughter's birthday was the end of May. She said she intended to redeem them before then, but she hadn't been able to do it. She confessed the whole thing to me on Wednesday afternoon when she gave me the necklace. She wept and cried, and I . . ." He shrugged his shoulders helplessly. "I suppose I'm a sucker for a woman's tears."

"But aren't we all," Spike reassured him with perfect understanding.

"Now you're going to ask me why I didn't get the pawn ticket from her and redeem the earrings before my daughter's birthday. Well, I had two very good reasons. In the first place I thought the discipline of having to sweat a little to get 'em out of hock wouldn't do Miss Lee any harm. And in the second place, to be quite frank, gentlemen, I didn't have the money myself. I never seem to have money. If I do, it sort of slides through my fingers and is gone."

Felix Penton's picture of himself, so charmingly irresponsible, seemed to go well with the slightly humorous, apologetic smile with which he made the confession. "Incidentally, did you find the pawn ticket with any of her things?"

"No," Spike said and went on hastily. "How did you square yourself with your daughter?"

"I lied. I have a weakness for lying when it comes to protecting a woman. And after all Miss Lee was a woman as well as a secretary. I told Anne I'd pawned the earrings once when I was terribly hard up. I believe in white lies."

Spike nodded. And in whopping black ones too, he observed silently. Aloud he called for a third round of drinks. And will Felix Penton's face be red, he was thinking, when he finds out his daughter has one of the earrings that Lina Lee "hocked"?

CHAPTER X

IT'S handy having a friend who works in a morgue. Not the kind of morgue with stone slabs and stiffness, but a newspaper morgue, where are interred the dead bones of a thousand human dramas that once paraded the front page.

Jo Killian was night man on duty in one of the biggest newspaper morgues in New York. He and Spike knew each other from way back. So he wasn't surprised when Spike turned up, demanding "everything you've got on Felix Penton."

"You mean the guy whose secretary's been bumped off?"

"Yeah. Only leave out the up-to-date stuff. The stuff that's happened since the murder. I know all that."

Presently Jo brought him a big manila envelope containing a pile of clippings, many of them showing the yellow of age around their crumbling corners. Spike worked on them until almost dawn. Then he sought the services of an open-all-night photostatic agency.

When he turned up at Headquarters the next morning, he flung himself into a chair and groaned. "God, I'm tired!"

"What have you been doing?"

"That." He pointed to a pile of photostats he had flung on Herschman's desk.

The Inspector leafed them through, his eyebrows going up in mild interest at some of the items. "And what are you going to do with 'em?" he asked as he laid the last one aside.

"Get Penton."

"You can't get a man with photostats of ten-twenty-year-old newspaper stories."

"I know. But I'm going to get everything on him I can. I'm going to get all the aces in the deck up my sleeve. And, when I know so much about him that he can't squirm out with affable lies, I'm going to have another go at him—damn his soul to hell."

"Say listen," Herschman protested, "you're getting awful het up about this guy. It ain't natural. What's the matter? Is it the girl?"

"Yeah."

"Looks like she's pretty well copyrighted, isn't she? Or are you planning to cut Bishop out?"

"Do I look like that kind of a heel—steal a guy's gal while he's sick in the hospital?"

"Oh, you're going to save him for her."

"Lord no, I'm not going all noble and sacrificial on you. But she's pretty as hell, and she's in a spot. Or her sweetheart's in a spot. Or her father. Any way you take it, she's holding the bag."

"And this was the job," Herschman reminded him, "that you didn't want to take on—until you saw Anne Penton."

"Oh, shut up! And hand me those photostats."

Herschman handed them over and Spike went through them arranging them in chronological order. The first one was dated December 3, 1913—a photograph.

Mr. Felix Penton, son of Josiah Penton, and Miss Cecile La Motte of the *High Ho!* ensemble at the annual Society-Stage masquerade ball.

"At the dawn of our history we present Mr. Felix Penton as a stage-door Johnny, squiring a lady of the chorus. Member of the ensemble

is ruffined for chorus girl." He picked up the next clipping.

January 10, 1915—Mr. and Mrs. Charles Poindexter Sorrell announced the engagement of their daughter, Elizabeth, to Mr. Felix Penton, son of Josiah Penton, at a dinner at the Waldorf last night. Miss Sorrell is a debutante of two seasons ago . . . The guests were . . . The bride-to-be wore a handsome necklace and earrings of emeralds set in old Italian gold, the gift of her fiance.

"Note that last sentence," Spike said as he tossed the clipping over to Herschman and went on to the next one.

January 27, 1915—Announcement has come from the real estate firm of Josiah Penton, Inc., that henceforth Felix Penton, son of Josiah Penton, will be a full partner in the firm and will . . .

"Our playboy," Spike commented, "being affianced to the daughter of a Social Register family, has thrown off his wild ways with chorus girls and is now settling down into a staid and solid businessman. And here—" He picked up a fourth clipping. "Here is the official copyright notice."

May 12, 1915—The marriage of Miss Elizabeth Sorrell and Mr. Felix Penton was solemnized this morning at St. . . .

"And now ladies and gentlemen, we have a period of two years of supposedly marital bliss. And then comes November 8, 1917. The orchestra will now play 'Over There'."

Mrs. Felix Penton entertained last night at a dinner party in honor of her husband, Captain Felix Penton, who has just been commissioned at Plattsburgh and will leave soon for overseas with the 10-nd Infantry. Captain Penton has . . .

"And so we fill in the time from November 8, 1917, until February 17, 1919, with a medley from the musical score of 'All Quiet on the Western Front.' And then . . ." Spike tossed another clipping to the Inspector.

Among those who returned on the troop ship *Dolphin* was Lieut. Felix Penton, son of Josiah Penton, of the firm of Josiah Penton, Inc. It is expected that Lieutenant Penton will assume his place in the firm as soon as he is officially demobilized.

"Keep your eye on that one. There's a joker concealed. Why did Penton go overseas a captain and come back a lieutenant? Doesn't show the good old Horatio Alger onward-and-upward spirit. And now—'Rockabye Baby in the Treetop.' Little Annie is born on May 30, 1920. At least nobody's lied about that—so far. That makes her exactly

21 on May 30, 1941. The next one's an obit. Mrs. Felix Penton, August 4, 1925. That would make the kid about five when her mother died.

"And here's the official publication of notification of dissolution of partnership between Josiah Penton and Felix Penton and it dates only a bit more than a month after the death of Mrs. Felix Penton. Looks like the old man for the sake of his daughter-in-law and his young granddaughter stood for Felix's shenanigans, but kicked him out as soon as she died. But not apparently without a shilling, because in January 1926 we find that Felix Penton has bought his way into the firm of Bascomb & Rogers, textile importers. And the next two are honeys."

Spike flipped them over to the Inspector. The headlines were big and bold and black, and the sob sisters who had written the stories had extended themselves. The first one was dated January 1, 1928.

Anne Penton, seven-year-old granddaughter of Josiah Penton, prominent real estate operator, was the center last night of a frenzied search by the Police Department and the Missing Persons Bureau—and at the same time the main attraction at one of the gayest New Year's eve celebrations in the city.

Eluding her nurse and the other servants in the East Eighty-fifth Street house where she lives with her grandfather, young Anne slipped away on business of her own. Her absence was not discovered until ten o'clock. It was immediately reported to the Police Department, and for three hours officers scoured the city. Josiah Penton offered a \$10,000 reward for the arrest of the kidnappers, and the Missing Persons Bureau watched all terminals and hotels.

It remained for Max Bailey, 15, bell hop at the Plaza Hotel, to solve the mystery at 12:30 this morning when the New Year's eve celebration was at its height. He overheard the house detective talking with the man from Headquarters assigned to the case, and he led them right to their quarry.

Young Anne was having the time of her life doing a dancing school version of the Highland Fling in the middle of one of the tables in the main dining room, surrounded by the riotous shouting and applause of the guests of her father, Felix Penton, host at the party.

"I wanted to see my Daddy," she told reporters after being removed breathless and triumphant with her first glass of champagne which she . . .

"Good Lord!" Herschman put down the clipping in disgust. "Giving a kid of seven a glass of champagne! And at that kind of a party!"

"The Child Study Association and Felix Penton did not, apparently, see eye to eye," Spike pointed out. "Read the next one." It was dated three years later.

Anne Penton, ten-year-old granddaughter of Josiah Penton, who for the past ten days has been the object of a frantic nationwide search by police of twelve states, was found early this morning at Tucson, Arizona, in the company of her father, Felix Penton.

"We've had a great time," Penton laughingly told reporters. "She ran away from home and joined me at my apartment ten days ago just as I was about to start on a motor trip across the country. So I took her with me. It was as good as a bandit chase—with us as the bandits. Twice we almost got caught. It was fun while it lasted, but I guess it's about time for Anne to go back home and be a good girl instead of a newspaper kidnap scare."

The child, who was handed over to the matron of the Tucson Police Department pending her return home, cried bitterly at the separation from her father. Felix Penton drove on to the coast today, and young Anne will be returned shortly to her grandfather in New York.

"In other words," Spike pointed out, "here is a child so passionately devoted to her father she runs away to see him. And here is a father—" He broke off with a grimace of distaste.

"Yeah," Herschman said. "The kid's all right as a stunt for a little while, but that's as far as it goes. Imagine, going off and leaving a kid like that with a police matron—I'm not saying anything against police matrons, you understand. You're right. The guy is a louse."

Spike laughed. "You don't know the half of it. Take a look at this." From the bottom of the pile he pulled the first clipping that he handed the Inspector—the photograph at the Society-Stage ball of Felix Penton and Cecile LaMotte.

Felix Penton and the lady of the ensemble wore black dominos and the lady concealed the right side of her face coyly behind a fan she held with her left hand. The costumes were those of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette, with satin and ruffles and wide panniers and paint and powder and patches. Spike handed Herschman a small magnifying glass from the desk.

"Take a good look at that gal and what she's wearing around her neck and on her ears."

The Inspector bent closer and peered through the glass. It brought up in large, sharp detail the jewelry of Miss Cecile LaMotte—a necklace and earrings—like the one Hesketh had surrendered—and all in a setting of old Italian gold.

"I wonder," Spike said, "if Penton's wife ever knew 'the gift of her fiance' had already served time with another woman. And now," he announced briskly, "I want as many men as you can spare for a scouring job."

"Dutch Cleanser or Sapolio?" Herschman inquired.

"Neither. Just the good old newspaper brand. You know—Local, State and Federal authorities are scouring the nation in a search for Whoosis Whoosis."

"Say, aren't there enough people tangled up in this job already without your ferreting out any more?"

"Too many. It would have all been much easier if we could have discovered someone standing over Lina Lee with a smoking pistol in hand, surrounded by six eyewitnesses to testify to murder. But we didn't. So . . ."

"O. K. How many men do you want and what do you want 'em to scour up?"

"As many as you've got, and I want 'em to get a list of all the officers of the 10-nd Infantry, A. E. F., and where they are now—names, addresses, and telephone numbers."

Herschman pressed a button, and a patrolman from the outer office appeared. He set things in motion. Then he turned back to Spike.

"Anything else? Don't be bashful about asking."

"And don't get sarcastic on me. I also want someone to go the rounds in the theatrical section, getting a line if possible on Cecile LaMotte, a chorus girl of the *High Ho!* company in 1913. Everything they can get on her."

"Say, did you ever hear of needles in haystacks?"

"Sure. I know. It's pie compared to chorus girls in New York."

"And close on to thirty years ago," Herschman reminded him.

"You're not saying anything I don't know. Now tell me, have you kept a close watch on Hesketh?"

"Of course."

"What's he been doing?"

"Going to the movies. Shooting a little pool. Having a drink or two. Graefel, the guy I've got tailing him, says it's a nice job. Hesketh knows he's being tailed, and he's chummy as all hell. He and Graefel shoot pool together."

"Have you checked back on his story?"

"Of course. Can't find a hole in it anywhere. I think the guy's on the level. He knows that, under the circumstances, he's in a spot and the wisest thing he can do is play ball straight. He's been positively identified at the offices of the Barber Line by the purser and several stewards on the SS *Monarch* that sailed on a West Indies cruise, Thursday, May 19. And he did go under the name of George Addison, and he returned to New York on Thursday, June 9."

"How about the earring he sold?"

"He's O. K. there too. We've located the man he sold it to. A perfectly legitimate dealer. Nothing shady about the transaction. The emeralds are particularly fine, and Hesketh got \$750 for the earring."

"Where's it now?"

"The dealer's still got it."

"All intact? Not broken up?"

"Sure."

"Give me his address."

Herschman looked suspicious. "What are you up to?"

"I want that earring back."

"Well, you can't get it back unless you pay \$750. There's absolutely no proof that it was stolen goods, and under those circumstances we can't do anything."

"I'm not asking you to do anything. I'm just asking you for the guy's name. I want the earring."

"Say listen, you don't think the Police Department is going to stand for any \$750 expense account, do you?"

"Who said anything about the Police Department or an expense account?"

Suddenly Herschman seemed to understand. "Oh, I see. You're shelling out of your own pocket, on account Anne Penton's a pretty gal."

"Give you time, Inspector, and you do get things."

Herschman wrote out the name of the dealer who had the earring and handed it to Spike.

"I'm wondering," Spike said, "how Felix Penton will explain the fact that Lina Lee gave the emerald necklace to him on Wednesday *noon*—you remember he was quite sure about the day and the time—but Sam Hesketh, a witness who seems to be unimpeachable even though he is an ex-convict, saw it at Lina's apartment Wednesday *night*. I wonder."

He yawned wearily. After all he had been up all night. "I think," he said, "I'll go home and sleep for three or four days until your boys get through the scouring process and scare up some of those 10–nd Infantry officers."

Three or four hours was more like it. Herschman's "boys" were quick on the draw. Too quick, Spike decided, when the telephone routed him out of bed at five o'clock that afternoon. The Inspector was on the other end of the wire.

"You're in luck," he said.

"Meaning . . ."

"We've located the colonel of Penton's old 10–nd Infantry regiment, and he's right here in New York."

"Nice work. Who is he?"

"Name's Sidney Prendergast. He's a rich bachelor, head of a building contracting firm with offices in the Chrysler Building, and he lives at a Central Park West apartment."

Spike noted down the address Herschman gave. "Anything on Cecile LaMotte?"

"Not yet."

Spike got up, yawned and stretched, and went into the bathroom

and took a shower. An hour later he was at the Central Park West apartment.

Any difficulties which he might have anticipated in making a plausible entry into Sidney Prendergast's life were immediately resolved. When he arrived, a cocktail party was in full swing, a typical New York cocktail party with anybody and everybody crashing the gate and no one—least of all the host—paying the slightest attention to new arrivals.

Spike grinned with satisfaction. Made to order it was. The Prendergast menage was a large and spacious one, and it was crammed full of people. Spike snared a cocktail for himself so that he'd look as if he belonged and wandered about. Pretty soon he sat down on a couch beside a girl.

"Which one," he asked, "is Prendergast?"

"Who?"

"Prendergast. The guy that's giving the party. The guy that pays the rent here."

"Oh him. I wouldn't know." She seemed mildly surprised that anyone should ask such a question. "Does it matter?"

"Not in the least," he assured her, and wandered on. There was a chap over by the window moodily surveying Central Park.

"Which one," Spike asked him, "is Prendergast?"

"Who?"

"Prendergast. The guy that's giving the party."

"Dunno. I just came with some other people. The Martinis are rotten."

He tried another girl and then a group of men who had settled down to some serious drinking in the library.

"Prendergast?" one of them said. "Oh, I know who you mean. You mean the guy that's giving the party. I think he's that fat one over there."

"No, no." There was a chorus of protests and then assorted counter-descriptions. "He's the thin one . . . He's the smooth-shaven, bald-headed fellow with the glasses . . . He's the one with the beard . . ."

Spike moved on. It was a chance remark in a shrill, half-drunk, feminine voice that finally enlightened him.

"... an' so I told 'em. I said Sidney Prendergast isn't like that. An' you're not, are you, Sid, darling? I told 'em . . ."

The girl was a lush bit of goods in a dress of pale green satin, just tight enough to show everything she intended to show. But Spike wasn't interested in her. He was looking at the man she was with and around whom she had flung a possessive arm.

Sidney Prendergast was lusty and full-bodied—but soft. There were rolls of flesh showing above his collar, and his hands, as they explored the green satin and what lay under it, were flabby. He was high.

"Sid, old boy!" Spike rushed up to him and pumped his hand. "God,

it's swell to see you again!"

Prendergast didn't even look puzzled. He pumped Spike's hand and slapped him on the back. "An' you know Lora, don't you?"

"Lora, darling!" Spike kissed her and managed to disengage the arm she had flung around Prendergast.

It was harder to disengage Prendergast from his guests—even though most of them were just a little hazy about who he was. It was almost eight before Spike, who by this time had achieved the status of a long lost brother, rich uncle, and bosom pal, was able to persuade him to get away from them all.

"Let's go some place out of this mess. Some place quiet. My head."

"Yeah, mine too. You know," he leaned toward Spike confidentially. "You know—I think I'm just a little—drunk."

They drove through the Park in an open taxi. The air was cool, and Prendergast sobered slightly. That was all to the good. Spike wanted him drunk—but not too drunk.

"To the old 10-nd," he said. "To the good old days when we were in the 10-nd together, Sid, old boy, old boy!"

Fortunately Sid's faculties were sufficiently blunted by liquor to keep him from figuring out that if Spike had been in the old 10-nd he must have come with his nurse from kindergarten.

"You know who I saw the other day?" Spike confided. "Penton. Felix Penton."

"Penton?" Prendergast repeated the name but didn't seem to be any too certain about it. Then he suddenly remembered. "Oh sure. Good old Penton! His secretary shot him. It was all in the newspapers. Poor old Penton!"

"No, no, she got shot. Not him. Remember Penton back in the old days of the 10-nd in France?"

"Remember him? Just like I could forget. Didn't I almost lose my commission over him? Didn't I have to think up some fairy tales to square things? Didn't I?"

"You sure did, Sid. Only I never did understand what was behind it all. How did you explain it?"

"Lied my soul to hell—clean to hell. If the two captains hadn't got killed the next week, I'd a been in a spot."

"What two captains?"

"Don't be so dumb. The captains that made up the court-martial board."

"Oh them. How did you square things with them?"

"I didn't have to. I told you they got killed the next week when we advanced. You don't have to square things with a couple of corpses, do you? After that I just changed the record. I still got hell when Headquarters heard about it. They said Penton should 'ave got shot. Refusing to advance under fire."

"Just blue funk." Spike nodded with sage understanding. "We all got that way one time or another. Tell me, though, because I never did get the story quite straight, did Penton—"

"Look—it was simple. It was on the Samogneux front. You remember Samogneux, don't you?"

"Oh sure."

"Well, Penton's in command of a company. He's supposed to take 'em over the top at five o'clock in the morning. He's got his orders. He's got his company. But he hasn't got any guts. That's what was the matter. No guts. No guts at all. He tried to use liquor in place of guts. He thinks if he gets drunk enough—Hey, waiter!" Prendergast broke off and waved to a passing waiter. "Another drink. We're dying of thirst."

"Yeah, go on," Spike said. "You were saying that Penton's idea was to get drunk."

"Yeah. I guess he figured if he got drunk enough he could go through with it. But he went through with two quarts of whisky instead. He got drunk all right. So damn drunk he forgot his orders. Forgot 'em completely. Forgot to tell 'em to advance at five o'clock. At five o'clock he was dead asleep in a dug-out."

"So that was the way it was."

"Sure. Every section of the trench advanced except Penton's. So I had to court-martial him. I couldn't do anything else, could I? Could I?" Prendergast was just drunk enough to want approval and confirmation.

"Of course not." Spike was satisfactorily reassuring. "So you and the two captains who subsequently got killed constituted the court-martial and condemned good old Felix to be shot."

"But what else could we do? What else?"

"Nothing obviously. Only—only you did—obviously."

"What do you mean?" Prendergast looked puzzled. It was a little too complicated.

"I mean you didn't have him shot. Instead he just got demoted from captain to lieutenant. Am I right?"

"Yeah. And it was a good thing for me that we were in a hot sector where things were happening and nobody had time to check up on details and men were getting killed plenty. You know the battalion was practically shot to pieces right afterward. You know that, don't you? And damn lucky it was for me, too."

"But the thing I never could understand," Spike persisted, "was why you did it. I mean reversing the court-martial sentence of shooting and substituting a mere demotion in rank. You and Penton weren't such pals, were you?"

"No, no. Oh, he was all right. We had some hot times together on leave in Paris. 'A hot time in the old town tonight.'" Prendergast

started to sing, and Spike muttered under his breath. That was the worst of trying to get things out of a drunk. He spilled easily enough, but all over the place. It was hard to keep him on the track.

"But I mean if Penton wasn't such a pal what made you do a crazy thing like that, that might get you into trouble?"

Prendergast grinned. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

Spike didn't say anything. Prendergast kept on grinning slyly, as if he were nursing a delicious secret. Spike finished up his second drink, took out his cigarette case, offered it to Prendergast, took one himself, lit it, and exhaled a long cloud of smoke. And all in the most leisurely manner. Completely uninterested.

"Nice little place here, don't you think?" he asked.

"Oh—huh?"

"I said this is a nice little place here, don't you think. The liquor's good, and it's not too noisy."

"Yeah," Prendergast agreed but without any marked enthusiasm. He wasn't thinking about the place. He was still nursing that delicious secret. Spike ordered another round of drinks. Prendergast took a long swig at his glass and then broke down. Half the fun of a secret is in telling it.

"She was pretty as hell," he said. "Kind of fresh and buxom with a just-off-the-farm 'look."

"Who?"

"This girl I'm telling you about."

"What girl?"

"This girl, dope, that pulled the trick for Penton."

"Oh, her."

"What do you mean, 'Oh, her' like you'd known about her all your life? You never heard of her before. I never told anybody about her before. Anybody. Nobody."

"And how did she pull the trick for Penton?"

Prendergast looked disgusted. "Use your imagination. Or if that's all used up, haven't you ever been to the movies? Didn't you ever see the noble, noble girl, in love with the gallant, gallant soldier who's condemned to death and she goes to the colonel who's a louse and a low beast and—well, you know—all the things colonels are supposed to be—and gives herself."

Prendergast lurched forward against the table.

"Oh, I get it. You mean this gal did some horse-trading with you?"

"I've heard it called other names."

"But that's what it amounted to. Had you ever seen her before?"

"No. How could I keep track of every dame at the base where we were billeted? In addition to the professionals, there were the British WAAACs and the theatrical entertainers and those goddamned American YWCA dames and hospital nurses."

"Which class did this gal fall into?"

"I dunno. I don't think she was a professional, though."

"What was her name?"

"I don't think she ever told me. No, she never did. I know she never did. Just an unnamed woman."

"Did you ever see her again?"

"Sure. That night and the next. She was a good business woman. She made damn sure everything was fixed up O. K. for Penton before she came across."

"Did Penton know about her?"

"No, of course not. I'm telling you. You're the first one I ever told this to. The very first. She made me promise. And now—" Prendergast was approaching the lachrymose stage. "And now I've broken my promise. I've—"

"I wouldn't worry about it." Spike said, and motioned to the waiter to bring the check.

CHAPTER XI

IF you turned your back on the long alley of stone areaways and looked to the west, the view was delightful over Central Park. The trees were very green, and the sky was very blue, and the day was very fine. And the chairs of Felix Penton's open-air terrace were exceptionally comfortable. Particularly to one who had been up half the night with a drunk.

Spike stretched himself luxuriously and took a deep inhale of smoke from a fresh cigarette. Herschman filled up his pipe. They waited for Felix Penton, who could be heard noisily taking a shower and singing off key somewhere through the French doors.

They had arrived bright and early as befits earnest and industrious sleuths. Felix Penton wasn't even awake. A maid had let them in and shown them to the terrace and taken their names to the master of the house.

In spite of being routed out of bed in what he doubtless felt was the middle of the night, Penton was cheerful and cordial. He had stuck his head through the French doors and called a greeting to the two men.

"I'll be with you in ten minutes," he assured them and had gathered a bathrobe around him and disappeared. Now, while they waited, Spike leaned forward and in low tones completed for the Inspector's benefit the narrative he had started on the way up.

"But what I can't see," Herschman protested, "is why some Jane's sleeping with a tough colonel of the A. E. F. in France over twenty years ago has got anything to do with the murder of Penton's secretary

two weeks ago."

"You've got me there, Inspector. I can't see it either, but you never know."

"What did you do with Prendergast finally?"

"What does anybody do with a drunk? I took him home about eleven o'clock and put him to bed. Lola was waiting for him. Mad as all hell at me. Anything on Cecile LaMotte?"

"Yeah. Sorta queer."

"Spill it."

"Well, I put Lowry on that job. He went to the Vance & Shumlin offices and found out that they produced *High Ho!* back in 1913 and she was in it all right. Seemed to have a fairly steady job with them. They were always putting on big revues and needed girls. The last one she was in was called *Glory Be!* in 1916. After that there's no more record of her, and there's no one around the offices who remembers her."

"Well, that's not particularly queer. They must have hired and fired thousands of girls since 1913."

"I know, but that wasn't what I was referring to. Vance & Shumlin always had a record of the home addresses of all employees. It was right up at the top of the time sheet. Well, Lowry got the home address of this Cecile LaMotte. It was on Riverside Drive. Must have been a swank place once, but now it's just an old-fashioned apartment house. There's a girl at the switchboard and one of those old-fashioned grillwork elevators.

"Both the switchboard operator and the elevator boys said nobody by the name of Cecile LaMotte lived there. So Lowry, who is a thorough, persistent cuss, goes down to the offices of Beckett & Allman. That's the company that owns the building.

"And down there they tell him sure, Miss Cecile LaMotte lives there in apartment 6B, a regular tenant of long standing. Lowry says how long, and they look up the records and she's had that apartment ever since early in 1913. Nobody there knew what she looked like. Said she always paid the rent promptly on the first of the month by money order. And—here's a queer one—their records show that the second year she was in the apartment—that would be 1914—it was redecorated. But it hasn't been done since. Can you imagine that? No redecoration on a New York apartment for more than twenty-five years!"

"Must look pretty crummy by this time."

"Yeah, that's what Lowry thought. After he got all the information he could at the office he went back to the building and talked to the super. Like the switchboard operator and the elevator boy, he didn't know the name, but he did know that 6B had a tenant. He'd been working there about five years, and on one occasion he said he'd had

to take his pass key and go in to do something about plumbing or light connections. Not, he said, that Miss LaMotte ever made any complaints or demands. Never a peep out of her, but sometimes when there were things wrong in other apartments and the connections were through 6B he'd have to go in there."

"Then he saw her?"

"No. But he saw the place. Says it's old-fashioned as hell, but clean and neat as a pin."

"Has Lowry been able to catch up with her?"

"No. He's been around there on an average of once every three hours, ringing the bell to 6B. It rings all right, but nobody answers it. What do you make of it?"

Spike was thoughtful, then shrugged his shoulders. "Queer. I tell you what, could we get a search warrant and have the super let us in?"

"Yeah."

"O. K. Then some time when we haven't anything better to do we'll drop around and go over the place. Maybe we'll find her home. Tell me, did Lowry try any of the other producers besides Vance & Shumlin?"

"All of 'em. Nobody else ever heard of her."

Penton came through the French doors looking very fresh and fit. There was a spring to his step and a smile on his face, and he didn't seem at all like a suspect in a murder case about to be surrounded and trapped by detectives. He looked like a man who was hungry and wanted his breakfast.

"I'll have the maid bring it out here," he told them. "Then I'll eat while you talk and you can join me in a cup of coffee. Right?"

It was hard to begin. Maybe Headquarters would have been better, with Penton sitting on a good hard seat with nothing before him but a blank wall. Here he was too much the gracious host, making himself quite comfortable in the bargain.

Spike waited until after the three of them had settled back to a second cup of coffee with cigars on the side. But when he started he didn't mince words.

"Penton," he said slowly with a certain hard admiration in his voice, "you are the goddamnedest liar I've ever met in a long career of meeting liars."

This bombshell made a slight pop, like the pricking of a child's balloon. That was all.

Penton laughed lightly. "Are you just finding that out?" and he took another sip of coffee.

Spike had to keep a grip on himself to repress a sharp retort. O. K., if that was the way Penton wanted it, that's the way he would get it. Only . . .

"Yeah," Spike said aloud, his voice as casual and nonchalant as

Penton's. "There are just one or two little matters—"

"I know. I know. One or two little matters that you want to check up on. What have I done now?"

"Well, you told us among other things, that Miss Lee delivered to you on Wednesday noon the necklace which you subsequently gave your daughter. Remember?"

"Of course. What about it?"

"Nothing except that we've got an unimpeachable witness who saw it at her apartment on Wednesday night."

"Would it be considered just nosiness on my part if I inquired who?"

"It would. But I'll tell you anyway. Her former husband."

"Huh?" This time the remark really scored. Penton looked surprised. "I never knew she had one."

"If you had known, would that have made any difference?"

"What do you mean?"

"I'm thinking about that intimate little rendezvous in the Catskills."

Penton grinned sheepishly. "My, how you boys get around. So you've dug that up."

"Yeah. That, Penton, makes your story look a little phony."

"What story?"

"Don't stall. You know what I mean. You led us to believe that Miss Lee was, shall we say, only a secretary."

"Of course," Penton replied complacently. "But maybe I failed to make it clear that I prefer secretaries who are not averse to—shall we say—overtime?"

"Is that why you preferred Miss Lee to Miss Asche?"

"Yes, I suppose so. After all . . ." He shrugged his shoulders.

"After all a man's a man. But couldn't you pay for the 'overtime' with something besides your dead wife's jewels that were promised to your daughter?"

"I never seem to have quite enough money to meet the pay roll. So . . ." Again the shoulder shrug. "But I got the necklace back," he pointed out, "and in time for Anne's birthday, so what's the harm?"

"Which brings us back to where we started. You told us that Miss Lee gave it to you Wednesday noon. Her ex-husband saw her wearing it Wednesday night. Why did you lie to us?"

Felix Penton heaved a great sigh—the sigh of one who knows he's in for a difficult time, but far from being alarmed, is merely slightly bored.

"Why did you lie?" Spike repeated.

"For a very simple reason," Penton replied patiently. "I lied because you wouldn't have believed the truth. You would have thought I was trying to wiggle out of a tight place by making up stories. Too

bad that ex-husband had to butt in. By the way, who is he and have you got him all surrounded by sleuths as you have the rest of us?"

"Never mind about him now. Suppose you tell us the truth you were afraid to tell us because it was so fantastic."

"O. K. You asked for it, so here it is. You want to know how I got the emerald necklace from Lina Lee."

Spike nodded.

"I didn't. I tried to and she told me to go fly a kite. I'd given it to her eight or nine months before. Well, hardly given. I told her I'd have to have the stuff back in time for Anne's birthday, but she didn't seem to remember. Anyway I didn't get the necklace from her Wednesday noon."

"When did you get it?"

"Saturday morning."

"And from whom?"

"Well, boys, keep your shirts on and don't say I didn't warn you. I got the emerald necklace on Saturday morning from a veiled woman."

There was a silence. Not a quivering pregnant silence, nor a silence fraught with emotional explosion. Just a plain, dull, incredulous silence.

"A veiled woman," Penton repeated.

"Yeah," Spike said, "we heard you the first time."

"But you didn't believe me."

"Listen, Penton—"

"I know, I know. You're about to say, 'Listen, Penton, don't try stuff that went out of fashion with Theda Bara and bustles.' You won't believe me. You think I'm nuts, or else you think I murdered Lina Lee and am going to all sorts of fantastic ends to get out of it. The fact still remains, gentlemen, that I got the emerald necklace on Saturday morning from a veiled woman. If this be treason . . ."

"Would it tax your inventive powers too much," Spike said with heavy sarcasm, "to tell us just a little more about the veiled woman and the circumstances surrounding the transfer of the necklace from her to you?"

"Wouldn't tax my inventive powers at all. Only I'm warning you that the rest is all of a piece with the 'veiled woman.' Saturday morning about ten or eleven o'clock, a woman called me on the telephone. She wouldn't give her name, but she asked me to come out of my house and walk over to Central Park and then proceed north along the dirt path on the east side of the Park. So I did."

"Are you in the habit of keeping strange engagements with strange women's voices over the telephone?"

"No, I don't make a habit of it, but we'll come to that later. Anyway, I did just as she told me to do. I went out and walked up the dirt

path on the east side of the Park, and presently I saw her."

"Who?"

"The veiled woman. That's what I have to call her because I don't know who she was. Anyway she came toward me, just like' any other pedestrian. I stopped, hesitated a little, but she just walked slowly past me. Only—" Penton paused for dramatic effect. "Only as she passed me she shoved something into my hands—a plain white box."

"Containing, I suppose," Spike put in, "the secret plans of a certain foreign government for demolishing the Panama Canal fortifications. Or perhaps it was a map showing the exact location of the jeweled Buddha in the mountain fastnesses of Tibet where no white man's foot has ever rested."

"No, as a matter of fact," Penton replied, entirely unruffled, "it didn't. It contained the emerald necklace that we seem to be making so much of."

"And you just stood there and took it?"

"That's right. I just stood there and took it."

"You didn't even thank the nice lady for her kindness?"

"No. The nice lady didn't wait to be thanked. She just went right on walking south, and pretty soon she turned off to the right and disappeared into the Park, and I never saw her again. And that afternoon I took the necklace around to my daughter's house and left it there with a note. Now does that explain everything?"

"Oh, everything, everything," Spike hastened to assure him. "After all we're just dumb cops who still believe in fairy tales. Why every night Herschman, here, listens in to Uncle Don. He tried Gang Busters once, but it upset him too much."

"Sorry," Penton said. "But I'm afraid you'll just have to take it or leave it."

"And if we leave it?"

"There's nothing I can do about it, is there?" He sounded as if he really didn't care about doing much about it.

"Look here, Penton, don't you realize what a spot you're in? Your secretary, whom you frankly admit was more than a secretary, has been murdered. Valuable jewelry known to have been in her possession a few nights before she was killed is subsequently found to be in your possession. And you ran away up to a hideout in the Catskills. You're in a spot." Spike was earnest, urgent, trying to pierce Penton's complacency. But it was no use. Penton only smiled.

"Sure," he said. "I'm in a spot. So what? But I've been in spots before."

"And the veiled woman, I suppose, has always appeared like some *deus ex machina* and neatly extricated you."

"As a matter of fact, yes."

"For Christ's sake, Penton, are you still sticking to that ridiculous story?"

"Yes. But I hardly blame you for not believing me. I wouldn't believe myself, only—" He paused. "Only it's happened before."

"Meaning?"

"I told you I'd been on the spot before. And this veiled woman always seems to turn up at just the right moment. At least twice before she has. Her appearance last Saturday brings the total up to three."

"Tell us about the other two times."

"I'd rather not."

"What's the matter—your powers of invention running out?"

"No. But I suppose anything I say will be used against me."

"Of course."

"In that case . . ."

"There are ways, of course," Spike pointed out, "of making you talk, and I'm not referring to rubber hose. Perfectly legal ways that would leave you holding the bag with a contempt order in it. You wouldn't like that. So you better start in now."

"But what's the use? You won't believe what I have to tell you. You don't believe what I've told you already."

"I know, but sometimes out of a mess of lies, you get, by the law of opposites or something of the sort, an indication of where the truth may be. Get going. When was the last time, excepting Saturday morning, that you saw the veiled woman?"

Penton hesitated. Then apparently decided against any further holdout. "All right. It was in the fall of 1929."

"You seem pretty sure of the date."

"Who wouldn't be sure of the fall of 1929. But maybe you never heard of the famous stock market crash."

"No, we haven't got that far in school yet. But go on."

"Well, I'd been doing just like everyone else in those days. Playing the market. Who didn't? And on margin of course. Then came the crash and I was in a spot."

"You had lots of company. The most you could do was lose your shirt."

"Yeah. Only trouble was that it wasn't my own shirt."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, what do you think I mean?" Penton was impatient.

"I see. You mean you were playing around with someone else's money. Whose?"

"Bascomb & Rogers. I was \$45,000 short on the company account."

"Well, why didn't you blow out your brains or jump from the Woolworth Tower?"

Penton smirked complacently. "I didn't have to. I got the money to cover up with."

"How?"

"I took a walk one night, and a woman all done up in black with a veil passes me on the street and shoves something into my hands. A small bundle. And when I got home I undid it. There was \$45,000 in bills. It saved my neck."

"I see," Spike said quietly. The melodramtic effrontery of the man was amazing. The . . . Spike paused mentally. Something was seeping into his consciousness.

"Tell us," he said, "about the first time."

Penton smiled ruefully. "The trouble with you gents is that you keep harping on incidents that show up the darker side of my nature. And I'll admit there are some pretty dark spots."

"You're telling us. Go on. The first time, please, and don't stall around."

"It was in France early in 1918."

Spike felt something grow taut inside him.

"I—there was—oh well, what the hell! I got court-martialed."

"What for?"

"I was supposed to lead an advance one morning and I didn't."

"Why not?"

"Why do you suppose? Because I didn't like the idea of being blown to hell, or hanging for hours on the enemy's wire, or maybe dying slowly of wounds and thirst in a shell hole. I'm funny that way. Not a good mixer."

"You mean you were scared."

"Exactly. So were a lot of others only they never had the guts to admit it."

Guts! Spike was thinking of what Prendergast had said the night before. ". . . no guts . . . no guts at all . . ." But maybe there were two kinds of guts. "Go on," he said to Penton.

"Well, they held a court-martial. The colonel and two captains, with just a sentry at the door to bring in the witnesses one by one. We were billeted in a half-ruined town, and they held the court-martial in a building that had probably once been the town hall. The room was on the ground floor, and there was a gallery running along one side. The place was gutted with fire and shell holes, but even at that it was the best there was available.

"I had to sit facing the court—the colonel and the two captains. And they sat with their backs to the gallery. The roof was low, and it was dark up there in the gallery. Shadowy. At first I didn't even know she was there."

"Who?"

"A woman. All in black, with a long black veil. I didn't pay a lot of attention to her. There were lots of women around the base dressed in black in those days. She just stayed back in the shadows and lis-

tened. I guess I was the only one who even knew she was there. And it didn't matter to me. I thought the game was up. Only it wasn't . . ."

He paused, meditatively, then went on. "I was sentenced to be shot two days later. And then the night before the final day, an order came from the colonel. Demotion only, from captain to lieutenant."

"And have you any reason to think that it was the woman in black who had anything to do with it?"

"No reason in the world. In fact I didn't even connect her up with the affair until years later—when she came the second time. Then I remembered the first time, and it seemed—strange. Saturday morning, after I got the necklace back, it seemed stranger still. Three times in my life, I've been in a terribly tight spot. And each time this woman in black with the long veil has turned up, and I've got out of it."

"So you admit, Penton, do you, that you were in a spot on Friday, May 27, the last time your secretary, Lina Lee, was ever seen alive?"

"I admit it. I had to have that necklace. I had promised it to my daughter for years. If I hadn't come across, she would have been desolate, broken-hearted."

"And if she had found out where it was," Spike put in, it might have dimmed her faith in her father."

"Exactly. And I couldn't have stood that. Anne's always been so naive about me. She's never seen any of my faults. I've always been gallant and charming and wonderful to her. And I'm not really you know. I'm a louse."

"You took the words right out of my mouth."

"Well, I am. Only I'd just as soon she didn't find it out."

"Particularly now that she's twenty-one."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I can stand a louse, Penton, but not a hypocrite. Now that Anne's twenty-one, she's boss of the money her grandfather left her. A nice little spot of cash. You could use it, couldn't you? Now let's get back to the subject."

"Which is?"

"This veiled woman. What does she look like?"

"How do I know? I've never seen her face."

"Well, is she short, tall, fat, thin, walks with a limp, or what?"

"That's just it. There's nothing particularly distinguishing about her. She's just ordinary height, ordinary weight, I guess, although it's hard to say. The veil has always covered more than her face."

"I see. And have you any theory to account for her?"

"Theory?"

"Yes. I take it you believe she's real flesh and blood, not a visual illusion or ectoplasm."

"Well," Penton temporized, "I can't help but think that—" he hesitated.

"Go on."

"If I do you'll think that in addition to being a liar, a louse, and a hypocrite, I'm also a goddamned conceited ass."

"Don't let what I think worry you. Just go on with what you think."

"All right then. The only way I have ever been able to explain this veiled woman in my own mind is to put her down as some woman who—who's been in love with me for years, who in some way, always seems to know when I'm in a tight spot, and who turns up with the right answer at just the right time."

To Penton's surprise, Spike seemed to consider this theory gravely. "Maybe," he said. "Maybe. Any idea who she might be?"

Penton didn't say anything. He rose and walked to the edge of the terrace and looked down over the Park. A fresh summer morning wind had come up from the north, ruffling his hair. In spite of the slight pepper of gray, he looked youthful, even a bit boyish. The kind of man a woman would love, for years and years, silently perhaps, watching over him, serving . . .

"Any idea?" Spike repeated.

"I don't suppose there much use pretending I haven't."

"Not a bit."

"Well then—" He hesitated for the last time. "Miss Asche."

CHAPTER XII

MR. Jake Reubens wasn't a bit happy about getting back to his job. In the first place the job was dull. And in the second place it seemed even duller than usual after two weeks of riotous vacationing at Keeger's Kozy Kamp up in Maine.

"Did I have a swell time? Was there dames? There was one in particular that . . ." Jake confided to the day operator on the rear service elevator as he took over for the night.

"Yeah," the day operator agreed as he reached for his coat and got ready to go off duty. "But did you miss hot stuff here!"

"Whaddaya mean—hot stuff in this dump?"

"Doncha ever read the papers?"

"I can read the papers fifty weeks of the year. I got plenty of time on this job. But the other two weeks I got something better to do."

But the day operator was not to be done out of his story. "Listen to what I got to tell you about a dame here, the one up at the Penton Press. They discovered just the day after you— Say, you didn't murder the dame, did you?"

"What dame?"

"The one I'm tellin' you about up at Penton Press, the bossy one that was all the time runnin' everybody ragged."

"You mean she got murdered?"

"That's what I'm tellin' you."

"Well, what do you know about that! Who done it?"

"They don't know yet. Maybe they'll think you done it. Clearin' out like you did right after."

"Whaddaya mean?"

"Well, you was on duty Sunday night before you went away wasn't you?"

"Sure. Just before Memorial Day. I left Monday morning on the bus."

"Well, the morning after you left, Tuesday morning, old lady Paskivi that cleans up on the fourth floor goes into the Penton Press office and finds this dame murdered."

"Jeeze!"

"She'd been murdered quite a while. The super talked to her about five, five-thirty Friday night, and after that there wasn't nobody seen her until Tuesday morning when Mrs. Paskivi started screaming bloody hell all over the building. They ain't sure, but they think whoever done the job, pulled it on Friday night. The cops was here and interviewed everybody and the super got his picture in the paper, on account he was supposed to be the last one that talked to her on Friday and—"

"Wait a minute." Jake was really impressed now. "You say Friday night?"

"Yeah. Later on that night Mr. Penton and another fellow that works there checked in through the front operator, but they say they don't know nothing about it. There was a dame too, but she— Say, whya lookin' so queer for?"

"—I just thought o' somethin'. Jeeze!"

Jake thought about it most of the night, for the night shift on the rear service elevator left lots of time for meditation. He made the rounds of the building once-each hour, and in between times he pulled his chair up to the door that gave onto a side street, so that he could get whatever air might be stirring. The cops . . . should he tell 'em or shouldn't he? . . . if he did he might get into trouble on account of the door bein' left unlocked . . . and if he didn't he still might get into trouble . . . Should he . . .

The super solved the dilemma for him before he went off shift in the morning. "Hey Jake, the cops are looking for you."

Jake looked worried. "I ain't done nothin'!"

"Well, you better go up and tell 'em in person. They left word as soon as you got back you were supposed to go up to Police Headquarters . . ."

At Headquarters Jake waited, shifting uneasily in his chair. If only he hadn't left that door unlocked. There was a rule . . . but on hot

summer nights . . . He waited.

It was almost noon when Spike and the Inspector returned from their long and revealing conversation on Felix Penton's terrace. A detective ushered Jake into Herschman's office and explained who he was.

"A swell time you picked to take a vacation," Spike reproached him good-naturedly. "We've been waiting two weeks to question you. You were on duty in the rear service elevator on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday nights, May 27, 28, 29."

"Yes, sir."

"And that rear service elevator when it comes down to street level opens onto an entry that has a door onto the side street."

"Yes, sir."

"Are you required to keep any record of who goes in or out, like the night operator at the front?"

"No, sir. I'm really what you might call night watchman. They don't hardly any freight ever come in at night. I just make rounds every hour and see that everything's O. K."

"And were things O. K. on the three nights I'm asking you about?"

"Well—yes, sir."

"You don't seem awfully sure about it."

"Well—I don't know—I mean . . ."

"Take it easy, brother. There's nothing to be worried about."

"Yeah, but—"

"Spit it out in poppa's hand. Get it off your chest."

"I might lose my job."

"You're sure to, if you don't come across."

"Well, you see I'm supposed to keep the freight entrance locked at night. The one that leads onto the side street. And I guess I been—well careless. If the super was to find out . . ."

"He won't if we can help it. Go ahead."

"Well, on warm nights like it's getting to be now I open the door and draw my chair up in front on account it's cooler. Then when I get up to go on my rounds, sometimes I forget to lock the door."

"And you forgot on the nights of May 27, 28, and 29?"

"Not on the 28th and 29th. That was Saturday and Sunday nights. I locked the door between rounds on them two nights. I mean it's what happened Friday night, that'd be the 27th, that kind of give me a jolt and I was more careful Saturday and Sunday nights."

"And what was it that jolted you?"

"Well, it was just about twelve-fifteen on Friday night, I guess. I start out on the hour, and it takes about fifteen minutes to make the rounds, so it must of been about twelve-fifteen when I brought the car down to the first floor, and I was just about to go back to my chair in front of the door—I'd left it open and unlocked like I told you—and I

heard a noise on the stairs. You know they's stairs right next to the elevator shaft. And I flashed my light up the stairs, and they was somebody there."

"Who?"

"It was a woman comin' down. And she looked kind of startled on account my flash was flashin' right in her eyes, but she come on down and—well, she just come down and walked past me fast and went out the door. That—that was all."

"Did you know who she was?"

"Uh—yes."

"Who was it?"

"Well, I don't sort of like to tell. I mean with a dame gettin' murdered—and you the police and—"

"Who was it?"

"It was the lady that works—at the Penton Press. Her name's Miss Asche."

Spike looked at Herschman, and his grip on his pipe stem tightened.

"You know Miss Asche?"

"Well, I know her when I see her. She's office manager up to Penton Press, and sometimes when stuff's delivered late from the printers or places like that, she'll stay to receive it."

"Are the printers in the habit of delivering stuff at twelve o'clock at night?"

"No, sir. If they're late it usually ain't very late. Say after six or seven."

"And nothing was delivered that Friday night?"

"No, sir."

"But the door opening onto the side street was at all times left open and unlocked while you made your rounds?"

"Well—yes, until after twelve."

"But before twelve someone could have come in while you were in another part of the building and gone up the back stairs to the fourth floor without anyone seeing them?"

"Yes, sir. Only if the super was to find out . . ."

"He won't. Have a cigar."

* * *

"A lousy job," Spike said and chewed irritably on his pipe stem. "A lousy, dirty, rotten job, and if I didn't love you like a brother, Herschman, you could take it and . . ."

"Yeah, but you do love me like a brother, so what are you going to do about it?"

"What do you think?"

"Talk to Rowena Asche."

Spike nodded. "And I don't like the prospect."

"You mean you really fell for this 'veiled woman' stuff of Penton's?"

"I didn't at first. And then I remembered something. Something both of us laughed off at the time."

"Such as?"

"The office boy, Freddie—what's his name?"

"Bingley."

"That's it. The Junior G-man. Trying to be so helpful with his gang theories and his 'crime o' passion.' We shut him up at that time, but verily, out of the mouths of babes and sucklings . . ."

Suddenly Herschman seemed to realize what it was all about. "Sure," he said, "I remember now. When he went down for the chocolate malted for Lina Lee."

"Yeah, that's it."

Herschman reached for the telephone. "We better get him down here again."

It wasn't far from the Penton Press to Headquarters, and Freddie Bingley beat all records. At last there was to be some recognition of his talents. And high time, too.

He arrived in a state of breathless excitement and addressed Spike and Herschman indiscriminately as "Chief." They called him "Bingley" instead of "Hey you!" or "Freddie" and his ego, long suppressed, flowered like a plant in the sun.

"Interesting idea of yours, Bingley," Spike was saying. "We'd like to go over a few points with you."

"Sure, Chief. You mean the one about her being the kiss o' death dame in an insurance murder mob?"

"No. I rather favor the 'crime o' passion' theory. Now the other day when we talked to you, you said that on the afternoon of Friday, May 27, Miss Lee kept you overtime and sent you down to the drugstore to get a chocolate malted milk. Remember?"

"Sure, Chief."

"Now when you went downstairs into the lobby you mentioned seeing someone there."

"Yeah, that was the hot tip I gave you. Did it pan out?"

"It—ah—that remains to be seen. Just tell us again who it was that you saw there."

"I dunno who it was. I never said that. I said I saw a veiled woman, all in black with a long black veil like going to a funeral. I couldn't see who it was."

"Well, was she short or tall or fat or thin or what?"

"Oh, just ordinary, I guess. It was hard to tell on account of the veil."

"And what was she doing?"

"Waiting for the elevator. She got on the car I got out of and went upstairs."

"How long were you in the drugstore waiting for the chocolate malted?"

"Oh, maybe five, ten minutes."

"And when you went back upstairs was there anyone in the office besides Miss Lee?"

"No. At least I never saw anyone there."

"But it would have been possible for someone to have been there without your seeing them?"

"Sure. Mr. Penton's got the big private office. That's the one Miss Lee was in. But then there's a small office right next to it that Mr. Bishop uses, and there's a door between."

"So that when you delivered the malted milk to Miss Lee it is possible that someone might have been in Mr. Bishop's office."

"Yeah, they could of. Say, Chief, do you mean this veiled woman is the one that popped off—"

"I mean, Freddie, that you're to keep your mouth shut tight about what you've just told us, or I'll bust it wide open for you."

"O. K., Chief."

After Freddie had gone, Spike got up and jammed his hands into his pockets and walked over to the window and glowered down at the hot pavements of Centre Street.

"A lousy job," he repeated.

"You're getting to be a softie," Herschman said. "What's the matter with you? The Asche Jane's not even pretty or young."

"She may have been once. But being secretary to Felix Penton for twenty-five or thirty years is enough to take it out of any woman. Particularly if she happens to be in love with him."

"Then you think she's . . ."

"I dunno. It's weird, it's crazy, it's melodramatic, it's fantastic. And all the time it's logical as hell. Here's this woman who's been in love with him all her life. Silent, frustrated, starved devotion. And she's his secretary, knows his business better than he does, knows all his private business, too. Knows when he's in a jam. No one else is in a position to know the things she does."

"Yeah, but you're forgetting something."

"What?"

"How would a dame that's only a secretary be in a position to fork over \$45,000, and what was she doing while Felix Penton was in France?"

"That's what we've got to find out. And I'd rather be shot than do it. Come on."

"Look, Rowena, broiled chicken livers. I thought they'd be a nice change." Cassie Framp dished up the brown, tempting morsels and put the generous plate down in front of Rowena Asche.

Rowena nibbled a piece of toast, sipped a cup of coffee, ate a little fruit and one of the chicken livers.

"I declare, Rowena," Cassie said with a trace of exasperation, "not enough to keep a bird alive."

"Does it matter?" For the first time during the meal Rowena spoke in a dull, flat voice.

"Of course it does. You can't go on like this. Why in the last two weeks you haven't eaten one single good meal. Even the things I fix special to tempt you, you don't eat. You don't eat—"

"Oh, eat, eat, eat!" The dull, flat voice came to life in a burst of tense irritation. "That's all you can think of, Cassie. Eating. Cooking food, shoveling it into people. As if that was all that mattered. As if—" She broke off suddenly, got up from the table, and rushed into the bedroom and slammed the door.

Cassie sat at the table, thoughtful for a moment. Then she crossed the kitchen and opened the door. Rowena was in a heap on the bed, shaking with hysterical sobbing. Cassie sat down and laid a quiet hand on the trembling shoulders.

"Rowena!"

"Oh Cassie!" Rowena grabbed her hand, held onto it desperately. "Cassie, forgive me. I'm all unstrung. I'm—"

"I know. I know. These last two weeks . . ."

Presently the hysteria and trembling lessened. Rowena raised herself from the bed, sat up slowly.

"Rowena, dear," Cassie said gently, pleading. "Don't try to carry things alone. Why don't you tell me? You always have before when things were bad."

"But this—this is different."

"Not to me. When you're in trouble, you're in trouble. It doesn't make any difference what kind."

"But—"

"It's that Friday night, isn't it—that night you stayed out till all hours and had me worried to death?"

"Yes," Rowena admitted, her voice almost a whisper, "the night she was—the night I—"

The doorbell shrilled through the little apartment.

"Dang!" said Cassie Framp and went to answer it. Her face lit up when she saw Spike standing in the doorway, but the smile disappeared when he introduced his friend as Inspector Herschman of the Homicide Squad.

"And now may we see Miss Asche?"

"Oh—ah—if you two gentlemen don't mind, you'll have to excuse

her. She's not feeling very well. Maybe I could help you."

"I'm afraid not."

"I suppose it's about the—the murder?"

"I suppose it is."

"Now look—" She turned to Spike in a practical, matter-of-fact manner. "As I said before, Miss Asche is not feeling well. She's all unstrung. She's a nervous sort of person anyway and these last two weeks since that Miss Lee got murdered have been hard on her. They've been hard on everybody involved. I saw Anne Penton the other day, and she looked peaked and worn, and she's a lot younger than Rowena.

"Now there isn't a thing Rowena knows I don't know, if it's information about the Penton Press you're after. We've lived together for years. Even before I married Mr. Framp. And I have her fullest confidence. She always has told me everything. So now you just go ahead and ask me what you want to know, and I'll answer the best way I can."

Cassie sat back and folded her hands. Spike smiled at her wryly. "No dice, Cassie. No dice."

"I don't understand."

"I mean the time has come when you can't protect Miss Asche. She's got to protect herself—if she can."

"What do you mean—if she can?"

"Just that. Now please ask her—"

"Now you please listen to me," she broke in belligerently. "If you think Rowena Asche is the kind of person that goes around murdering people, it just shows you're stupid and dumb. And that's what you are thinking. You never stop, do you, to find out a few things before you go off half cocked?"

"What few things?"

"Well, I'll admit I don't know much about detecting and that sort of thing, but in books fellows that know their business try to find out where folks were when a murder's been committed. Alibis—that's what they call 'em."

"And has Miss Asche got an alibi for the murder of Lina Lee?"

"Yes," Cassie said triumphantly, "she has."

"Very interesting. Would you mind explaining?"

"Not a bit. Friday afternoon—that would be Friday the twenty-seventh—Rowena wasn't feeling so well and she came home early. She left the office about four-thirty and she was home by five."

"How do you know she came home?"

"Because I was here myself and I was surprised to see her so early. It's usually five-thirty or six when she gets here. And we sat down and had supper and didn't get through until almost seven. So there!"

Spike was unmoved. "Interesting," he said "if true."

"So now you're calling me a liar, are you?"

"Cassie, darling, don't lose your temper. Even if you're not lying, even if Miss Asche was here from five until seven, that is still hardly a perfect alibi."

"I don't know what could be more perfect."

"Well, life may begin at forty, but it doesn't stop at seven. There are hours *after* seven."

"Listen—you're not the only one who's got your wits about you. I guess I can figure a few things out for myself. Especially when Anne Penton happens to be a very old friend of mine too."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh!" Cassie was exasperated and disgusted. "Anne hasn't got any mother. She hasn't got anybody to turn to, so she turns to me. She tells me things. She told me everything about her being in the Penton Press office that night, Friday, and finding Lina Lee dead."

"Now I'm not saying that Anne showed good sense in not calling the police right away. But she's made up for that by now. She's told you that that woman was killed some time around five-thirty or six. And all the time this was going on Rowena was right here." And Cassie followed it up with another triumphant "So there!"

Spike was nodding slowly. "That's right. Anne Penton did say all that. But she didn't prove it. And there isn't another soul in the world to substantiate her story."

"But—but—" Cassie's indignation mounted.

"I'm afraid, Cassie, until Anne Penton either brings forth proof, or somebody else appears to substantiate her, things will look not too hot for Miss Asche. As a matter of fact, they're not too hot for Anne Penton herself."

"Why I never—"

"Stow it, Cassie. Don't you see I can see right through you? That you're as transparent as cellophane? You're talking your right arm off, maybe lying your soul to hell, trying to spare a friend. But it's still no dice. So since you won't take us to Miss Asche, we'll go to her."

Spike rose and started across the room.

"Where are you going?" She was at his heels, fiercely.

"To get Miss Asche."

"Oh no, you're not." She darted ahead of him, threw herself in front of the bedroom door.

But it was her last desperate stand. She knew she was licked. It showed in her eyes. There were two men in the room twice as strong as she was. Spike looked at her a bit sadly, then shoved her gently aside and went into the bedroom.

Rowena had risen from the bed and was sitting in a chair by the window, gazing out into the rear areaway of the apartment building with a strange, tragic intensity. At first she didn't even seem to hear

the door opening. Then she looked up.

Spike and Herschman came into the room and Cassie followed close behind. "Miss Asche," Spike said, "we've got to talk to you."

She took a deep breath. "Yes—I—I suppose so."

"Well, if you will insist on it," Cassie put in, "we might just as well be comfortable. Now if one of you gentlemen will just get a chair from the living room, and I'll sit on this bed over here and—"

"Alone," Spike broke in, looking at Cassie. "And please shut the door when you go out."

She started to protest, and the little black mole just above the left-hand corner of her mouth seemed to quiver with indignation. But again she knew she was defeated. She went out without saying anything and closed the door none too gently behind her.

"Now," Spike said, turning back to Miss Asche. "Now let's talk. First of all, Miss Asche, can you tell us what time you arrived home here on Friday afternoon, May 27th?"

"Some time around five, I think. I didn't feel well that afternoon, and I left the office early. About half past four, I believe."

"And what did you do when you got home?"

"I—I, oh I don't remember—I think I lay down a while and then later after Cassie came home—I took a cool shower and we had supper."

"I see. So Cassie wasn't home when you got here?"

"No. She was out shopping and she didn't get home till late."

"How late?"

"I don't know exactly. But some time after six, I think."

Under other circumstances Spike would have grinned in triumph. He didn't now. He didn't feel triumphant. He felt as if he'd rather be doing anything else in the world than sitting here probing into the tragedy of Rowena Asche. He went ahead just the same, though. But the next question he asked was such an unexpected one that she looked bewildered.

"Miss Asche, have you ever been in France?"

"Why—why yes."

"When?"

"During the war."

"What were you doing?"

"Y. W. C. A. work."

"Whereabouts?"

"Oh—different places. I was with a billet corps that set up club rooms at the bases."

"Ever at the base near Samogneux?"

"Samogneux?" She repeated the name probing back into her memory. "Perhaps. I don't remember. We were so many places."

"I know, but I'm asking about just this one place. Samogneux."

Think hard again."

"I—I don't know—I don't remember. Oh, why don't you say what you came for?" she burst out.

"That's one of the things we came for—to find out where you were between the time Felix Penton left his father's firm for Plattsburgh and the time he returned."

"Well, I've told you. I was in the Y. W. C. A.—somewhere in France. A lot of different places. Maybe I was at Samogneux. I can't remember." Her nervous hands twisted in her lap. The small purple blotch on the right side of her face seemed to quiver.

"Well, if your memory is rather hazy on geography, perhaps it will be better on mathematics. Did you ever possess \$45,000?"

She laughed ruefully. "That's funny. How would I ever get \$45,000?"

"I'm sure I don't know. But I'm not asking how you might have gotten it, I'm asking did you ever have it."

"No, of course not."

"Now to get back again to Friday, May 27. You say that Cassie came home late and then you had supper. And then what did you do?"

"Oh, nothing in particular. I think I read a while."

"How long?"

"I couldn't say exactly. Perhaps an hour. Maybe more."

"And then what did you do?"

"Oh—I—I went out for a walk. It was hot, and I thought maybe it would be cooler out in the street."

"I see. And Cassie went with you?"

"No. No—I was alone."

"And where did you walk to?"

"No place in particular. Just around."

"Did you stop anywhere on your way?"

"No."

"You just walked around the streets?"

"Yes."

"For how long?"

"Oh—quite a while."

"An hour?"

"Maybe. I think it was longer than that."

"Two hours?"

"Yes. Maybe two hours."

"And what time did you get back here?"

"I—I don't know. I didn't notice."

"You're quite sure about all this?"

"Yes—quite—sure."

Spike was thoughtful. Ordinarily at a point like this he would have cracked down. Now, instead he switched to a new tack.

"You've known Felix Penton for a long time, haven't you?"

"I've known him for more than twenty-five years."

"You must know him pretty well then?"

"Yes—I do."

"And I suppose being his private secretary you've known most of his—personal affairs?"

"Every secretary does."

"Of course. You've known when he was in trouble, when things weren't going so well for him?"

"Yes."

"You've known—how to extricate him from his difficulties?"

Spike could see her chest rising and falling in quick shallow breaths. "I think—that if it's Mr. Penton's personal affairs you're interested in—I think you had better consult him. Not me."

"We have, already. He—as it were—referred us to you."

"I don't understand."

"Perhaps 'referred' isn't just the right word. Perhaps I had better explain a little. We had a long talk with Mr. Penton recently. He was very frank with us. He told us a lot of things about his personal life, and he told us among other things, that whenever he got in a jam there was a woman to get him out of it."

"Mr. Penton is a very attractive man—especially to women."

"But he wasn't talking about women in general. He was talking about a specific woman. There has been some woman who has played a big part in important moments in his life. And the part she has played indicates that her association with him must have stretched over a long period of time and have been very close. So close that she knew some of his most private affairs. And always at the right moment she has turned up with the right answer. She turned up with the right answer—only recently. On Friday, May 27."

"What do you—mean?"

"The death of Miss Lee was a very fortunate thing for Mr. Penton. Do you understand now?"

She looked at the two men for a moment. Just looked at them. "You mean, Mr. Penton—told you that I—he accused me of—of *murder?*"

"Not directly. He's too suave a gentleman for that. Or shall we say too slick a customer? But he made it rather plain."

"Plain? . . . Felix Penton made it rather plain that I . . ." She wasn't looking at them now. She was staring into nothingness, and her voice as she repeated the words was heavy with bitterness. She spoke like one talking to herself, unconscious suddenly of those about her. "Felix Penton . . . said that I . . . all my life, my whole life . . . *betrayed . . .*"

Spike shook her gently to bring her back to her surroundings. He couldn't stand it. It was like watching a woman undress her soul.

"Miss Asche." He shook her again, this time harder. "Miss Asche."

She sprang up suddenly, shook off his hands. "Go away. Leave me alone." Her voice rose shrill with hysteria. "Get out of this room. I can't stand any more. I can't—"

The door burst open. It was Cassie. Her eyes were blazing. "Get out of here, both of you. Get out!"

"So you were listening at the door all the time, were you?"

"You bet I was, and I heard every word. Now get out." They were still two men twice as strong as she was, but they were the defeated now. Defeated by Cassie's fierce anger and the hysteria of Rowena.

They filed out of the room. Cassie shut the bedroom door after them, followed them to the foyer.

"And don't come back. Because if you do, if you come back questioning her again she'll go crazy. She can't stand it. She's on the verge of it now."

She pushed them through the door, slammed it shut upon them. Spike and the Inspector stood in the hall. Spike took off his hat and wiped great beads of perspiration from his forehead. The Inspector did likewise.

"It looks like . . ." Herschman said.

"Yeah, I know. Don't tell me. Don't—"

He stopped short, held up by sounds from within the apartment. A chair knocked over, someone stumbling violently against a door, then a woman's scream.

"Rowena—no, no—Rowena—stop it—you mustn't . . ."

Spike rattled the knob, beat on the door. There was too much noise on the other side of it for anyone to hear him. Cassie's voice, begging, protesting, pleading—the sounds of a struggle—a crash.

Spike and the Inspector exchanged lightning glances. They lined their stout shoulders together. Spike gave the signal. This time there was the crack of splintering wood. Again the two stout shoulders like twin battering rams acting in unison. The middle panel of the door gave way. Herschman's fist finished it. Spike reached through the opening and turned the knob from the inside.

They rushed into the apartment—across the foyer—

The two women were in the bedroom, struggling, panting. It was just as Spike gained the bedroom door that the gun went off. By the time he reached the two women they had fallen apart. Each one was gasping, panting. A chair was overturned, and a vase from the dresser was smashed into a thousand pieces.

The gun was lying on the floor between the two. Spike reached down and picked it up. He looked from Cassie to Rowena Asche. Neither of them hurt. He looked up and saw the place on the ceiling where a bullet had torn its way through the plaster.

He put the gun in his pocket. "We'll take this back to Headquar-

ters with us," he said briefly and turned and left the room.

It was an hour later before they got the report from Parry, the ballistics expert.

"That's it, all right," Parry said. "One of those old-style .38's they used in the army twenty years ago during the World War. The bullet the Medical Examiner took out of Lina Lee came out of that gun all right."

CHAPTER XIII

"BUT what do you want to delay for?" Herschman protested.

"I'm not delaying. I'm merely putting the final touches to the whole edifice."

"You should have let me put a tail on her. In the meantime she might get away."

"Hope she does."

"Maybe you do, but what about me? I've got a job to hold down."

"Well, any time you lose yours you can have mine. I wish to God you had it right now, that I'd never taken it. Here, this must be the place."

The police car in which they were riding north on Riverside Drive drew up in front of an old-fashioned twelve-story apartment building. The foyer which they entered was old-fashioned too, but well kept. Even the red plush chairs and the rubber plants seemed dusted.

They asked the girl at the switchboard to get the super, and, when he came, Herschman showed him the search warrant. The super's eyes popped.

"Say, what's the big idea?"

He was frankly disappointed when he arrived at 6B and unlocked the door for them and was then sent on his way. It wasn't the kind of house in which search warrants were all in the day's work.

They stepped into a small entrance hall and drew the door to behind them. It was darkish, and Spike reached for the electric light switch. There was a snap—but no light. Herschman looked up at the ceiling.

"No bulbs," he pointed out.

The entrance hall led into a living room flanked on one side by a kitchen and on the other by a bedroom. There were no bulbs in any of the electric light fixtures. "Most likely," Spike said, "there's no electricity turned on."

"Yeah, that's right," Herschman said. "Lowry's still working on this end of the case and he reported this morning. Yesterday he went to both the gas and electric companies, but there's neither in this apartment."

The shades were half drawn. Spike crossed the room and raised them high and let the light stream in. They stood in the middle of the living room and looked around. It was orderly, clean, and the furniture of the "mission period," so popular in the early nineteen hundreds, was well polished.

There was dust—but only a little. Perhaps the accumulation of five days or a week. The wall paper was old and faded, but there were no cobwebs. The varnish on the woodwork was peeling in spots, but there was no detritus of years of city dirt-laden air.

The kitchen, too, at the right was spotlessly clean—but bare. Spike opened cupboards. There were dishes, cooking utensils, glassware—but none of the usual staple supplies. Only in the broom cabinet was there any sign of occupancy—a broom, dust mop, some rags, soap and scouring powder. Spike sniffed a half-used cake of soap.

"Fresh," he observed. And the scouring powder, he noted, was a brand that had been put on the market only in the last two or three years.

They went back into the living room and crossed to the door leading into the bedroom. Here, too, was order, neatness, cleanliness. The bed had a handsome silken spread, but there were no sheets or bedding beneath it. There was a bathroom, shining and immaculate, but no familiar tooth paste or powder, no used washrag on the towel rack.

Herschman threw open the door to the closet, while Spike opened empty dresser drawers. "Hey look," the Inspector said, and both of them peered into the dark depths of the closet. There were three garments there on hangers. A gentleman's costume. More than that. A king's, all satin and lace frills, old with the silk beginning to crack and the lace yellow with age. And beside it a woman's, wide-pannied—a queen's.

"Louis the XVI and Marie Antoinette," Spike murmured.

"Huh? What's that?" Herschman said.

"Marie Antoinette was a lucky gal. She died quickly. Just one swift slice, and it was over. Better that way. Lingering death . . ."

"Say, I don't know what you're talking about."

"Take a look at this then. It's simpler to understand." Spike brought the third garment out of the closet and held it up.

Herschman gasped. "The veiled woman!"

"Um. These must be her working clothes," and he put the black dress and the hat with the long black veil back into place.

"Well I'll be damned! What do you make of it—this tomb, I mean?" The Inspector indicated the apartment.

Spike nodded. "Yeah, that's it. Tomb. The tomb of a long-dead love. My God, I'm getting maudlin."

He motioned Herschman back into the living room, and they sat down. Herschman looked uncomfortable. "Do you suppose I'd dare

light a cigar?"

"Why not? It won't matter—now."

"Spill it," the Inspector said impatiently. "I don't get this joint. It gives me the creeps."

"Don't you see it? It's plain as day. For more than twenty-five years this, to some woman, has been a shrine—a shrine to be kept just as it was when she lived in it and was happy. It's the tomb of her lost happiness."

"Good Lord, you are getting soppy."

"I know. But it's not my fault if a woman insists on being a damn fool for a quarter of a century or so."

"Herschman's brows furrowed. "I get it now. This Cecile LaMotte has all the time been keeping this place up because she once had a hell of a good time in it."

"Yeah."

"Well, I once had a hell of a good time down to Coney Island when I was young, but I'm letting the city worry along about the upkeep."

Spike sighed. "I'm afraid, Inspector, the softer side of your nature hasn't been developed. You don't get the woman's angle. What is inextricably bound up in the supreme happiness of a woman?"

"What is this? Information, Please?"

"A man, Inspector, a man. Cecile LaMotte lived here with a man, and she never forgot it."

"What man?"

"Felix Penton, dope!"

"Say, I am a dope. Those costumes like in the picture in that bunch of clippings. And that black get-up. The veiled woman."

"Just like in the movies. Come on, let's get going. There's nothing more here . . ."

But at the door he suddenly remembered that all the shades were up. "You go ring for the elevator," he told the Inspector, "while I'm pulling 'em down. We should leave the place as we found it."

He went around quickly, lowering shades. In the kitchen—the living room—the bedroom. But in the bedroom, he did more than just that. He slipped under his coat something he had found in the top drawer of the dresser. By holding his arm pressed tight against his side he could keep it in place.

But when they were riding back to Headquarters, the Inspector commented on what seemed to be a slight rigidity of posture.

"Sciatica," Spike explained. "I'm getting old."

"Is that what's shut off your gift of gab, too?"

But Spike made no attempt to explain. At Headquarters he sought the first opportunity for privacy—in the men's toilet. With the aid of a magnifying glass and a small pocket torch he examined for a long

time the thing he had taken from the apartment.

* * *

When he got back to Herschman's office, there was a surprise waiting for him. Anne Penton was there, and with her Cassie Framp.

It was a surprise—and a disconcerting jolt. Disconcerting because things had begun to go round in his mind. Go round and fall in place. A vague something that had been forming in his subconscious mind from a word here, a remark there, had emerged and taken shape. A tenuous, amorphous conglomeration of facts, which up to this time had been seemingly unrelated and inconsequential, had organized themselves into a slowly emerging pattern whose outlines seemed to grow in distinctness. A photograph, now safely hidden in the men's washroom, had been the catalytic agent.

He would have preferred to go off by himself, to sit in some little East Side park perhaps, surrounded by shouting children, and think. He must think. The pattern of his suspicions was too crazy, too fantastic.

But Anne Penton and Cassie Framp were there and must be heard. Must, because there was a fierce urgency in the girl's voice, a quiet, unbending firmness in the older woman's manner.

"There's one thing Anne hasn't told you," Cassie was saying. "And now I've persuaded her that she should—that in the end holding back will do more harm than telling. Go on, Anne."

The girl hesitated. The job ahead was hard—terribly hard. She seemed to be gathering strength for the ordeal. Cassie pressed her hand firmly, and that appeared to help. When she started to talk, her voice was unsteady, but it gained strength as she went on.

"The other day when I told you—about—about being in the office the night Miss Lee was murdered, you told me that you had only my word for it—that I'd have to furnish proof. Well, I've brought—the proof."

She opened her handbag and took out an envelope, and from it she drew three sheets of paper and spread them out on the table in front of her. One was small, apparently torn from a plain white scratch pad. It was covered with penciled handwriting. The second was the regulation 8½ x 11 letterhead of the Penton Press, and the third was a carbon of the second. The carbon paper was still between the two sheets. And at the bottom there was a jagged tear as if, perhaps, the three had been ripped too hastily from a typewriter.

"That night when I came back from the ladies' room," she continued, "and went into the office, I thought it was empty, as I told you before. And I went around closing windows. I went into my father's

office to close the window in there and then—then I saw her.

"She was crumpled down halfway under the desk and on the floor beside her was a scratch pad with a note written on it and a pencil—just as if they had dropped from her hands when—when it happened. I—I read the note on the scratch pad—and then the letter. It was finished—but it was still in the typewriter. These—these are they," and she shoved the papers which she had taken from her bag across the table toward Spike and the Inspector.

Spike picked up the penciled note, and he and Herschman studied it. "You know whose handwriting this is?" he demanded.

"Yes. It's Miss Lee's. Anyone in the office can verify that."

Spike read the note: "Mrs. Bridenthal—Here's a carbon of the letter I have just written, the one we discussed the other day. It will be mailed to your husband on Monday noon at twelve o'clock unless—You know what I mean. I explained all that. I've just this minute talked on the telephone to our mutual boy friend and reminded him again, too, so maybe you two better get together and put on the heat. If I get the \$50,000 on schedule, I'll clear ou—"

The note broke off in the middle of a word.

Spike nodded slowly, and reached for the letter with the carbon. It was addressed to Philip J. Bridenthal. He and Herschman read it together. It was bald, bold, naked . . .

"Dear Mr. Bridenthal: Perhaps it would interest you to know that your wife and your business partner, Mr. Felix Penton, have been making a monkey out of you for years. As far as your wife's concerned, you're just a good meal ticket for her—and for Felix Penton. And as far as Felix Penton's concerned, she's just a good meal ticket—for Felix Penton. He has wasted the money you've put into the Penton Press in bad management and on his personal expense account. But that's only the half of it, because the amount he could get via the Press was only about half as much as he needed. So he's been bleeding you all these years not only through the company but through your wife. When she didn't dare ask you for any more money for fear you'd get suspicious, she even hocked her jewelry. Well no, not hocked. She had imitations made and sold the originals, and Penton took the money. Penton would take his grandmother's false teeth if there was any gold in them. I know what I'm talking about because I'm about the only woman who ever met-up with him that didn't fall for him. He fell for me and I've made a good thing out of it. If there's anything else you want to know you can always find me at the Penton Press where I'm Mr. Penton's private secretary—and how. Very truly yours—"

There was no signature, but a space had been left for it, and below the space the name of "Lina Lee" was typed. Spike laid the letter back on the table.

"Now you know," Anne Penton was saying with a sort of desperate

quietness. "Now you know why I didn't want to produce the proof you asked for."

"Yes," Spike said. "I can understand. Only of course you know this letter is only typed. You could have typed it yourself."

"But—but I didn't."

"You—"

He started to speak, but Cassie Framp broke in impatiently, accusingly. "You're fine detectives, you are."

"What do you mean?"

"Where's the typewriter that this Lina Lee was working on when she got killed?"

"In the office of the Penton Press."

"Has anybody been using it since all this business happened?"

"No one's touched it. The private office of Mr. Penton has been kept locked."

"Well, then," Cassie went on triumphantly, "if you'll go to that typewriter and twist it around, like as not you'll find the rest of the pieces. See how that's torn." She pointed to the jagged edges of the letterhead, the carbon paper and the carbon. "Well, it was torn right out of the typewriter by Anne here. The other pieces ought to be still under that thing they twist around. Detectives!" Cassie sniffed contemptuously.

Spike grinned. "Attagirl, Cassie! When did you turn sleuth?" He rose and crossed the room to the safe where Herschman kept a big box containing the exhibits of the case. He brought the box over to the table and began taking things out of it. The gun with which Rowena Asche had tried to commit suicide only the day before, the gun that had fired the bullet that had killed Lina Lee. The small purple onion they'd picked up more than two weeks before in Lina Lee's apartment. Lina Lee's handbag—with the keys missing. An electric light bulb. An envelope containing three bits of jagged paper.

"I had a feeling these would come in handy some time," he said as he laid them on the table and fitted them neatly to the lower edge of the letter, the piece of carbon and the second sheet that Anne Penton had handed over to them.

Cassie was indignant all over again. "Why, you knew all the time."

"Sure. What do you think I don't get paid for? Tell me something, Miss Penton, does your father know that—well, that you have this letter?"

"Y—yes." Her voice was very low and her eyes didn't meet his.

"And he has tried to get it from you?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you give it to him?"

"Because—it's all the proof I've got to—to clear Sta—Mr. Bishop," she answered, still avoiding his eyes.

"Go ahead and call him Stanley. We know you're in love with him. And you've cleared him all right. He was on the train from Philadelphia while Lina Lee was being murdered. Did you know—of its contents before you read it?"

"I—I had guessed. I had guessed a long time ago."

"And you realize, don't you, that although your move today has cleared Stanley Bishop, it has put your father in a worse spot than ever?"

"Yes." Her voice now was barely a whisper.

"In other words you love your sweetheart more than your father. Is that it?"

"No, no—yes—I mean . . ."

"Here you, stop that now," Cassie cut in roughly, but the "you" was intended for Spike and not for the girl. "Stop badgering her."

Spike transferred his gaze from the girl to Cassie. He was thoughtful, tracing aimless patterns on the table with one finger. He picked up the gun from the midst of the exhibits that he had produced from the safe. Seemed to weigh it speculatively. He toyed with the purple onion.

"For that matter," he reminded Cassie, "what Miss Penton has told us today still leaves Miss Asche in a spot. You lied you know, Cassie. You weren't in when she got home Friday night. We have only her unsupported word that she was there at five."

"Well, maybe—maybe I did lie," Cassie admitted with grudging belligerence. "But—but you don't seem to understand that—well, Rovena's not the only woman Felix Penton's ever known."

"But you don't seem to understand that—"

"Look here, young man, you're not the only person in the world that can be a detective."

Spike smiled with amusement, balanced the purple onion on the back of his hand, gave a little toss and caught it in his palm. "Oh, I see, you've been going to the movies."

"Well—maybe I have."

"O. K. Then come across with the goods."

Cassie hesitated, a frown creasing her placid brow. "I tell you what. Why don't you and the Inspector here come up for dinner tomorrow night, and I'll tell you all about it."

"You sound awfully sure of yourself, my gal."

"Well, maybe I do. Inspector do you like southern fried chicken with candied sweet potatoes and corn muffins?"

"He'll try and choke it down," Spike answered for him. "But why not tonight?"

"Because I can't get a decent dinner for four people without a little time ahead. Unless you want just hamburgers and onions."

"No, please. Don't mention onions. They've got me down. This one,

anyway," and he gave the purple onion another playful toss into the air. "What time will we come?"

"I'll be expecting you at six."

"But I tell you it's goofy," Herschman protested after they had gone.

"Sure it's goofy," Spike agreed. "So what?"

"But just when we've got everything sewed up tight . . ."

"But you know," Spike pointed out, "she's right. Rowena Asche isn't the only woman Felix Penton ever knew."

"Do you mean you're going to sit down on your can and wait until some crazy dame who thinks she's got ideas gets ready to spill 'em to you?"

Spike nodded.

"Oh, all right!" The Inspector was exasperated and disgusted. "But in the meantime I'm putting a tail on everyone in this case. Felix Penton, Anne Penton, Miss Asche, this dame Cassie, Mrs. Bridenthal—everyone."

"No, no, it might cramp Cassie's style."

"You're taking her seriously?" Herschman was incredulous.

"Wait until you eat her fried chicken. A woman who can cook like Cassie must always be taken seriously."

"Oh, my God," Herschman said, "I give up."

CHAPTER XIV

GREAT, black thunder clouds came up from the west, but the high buildings of the city obscured them until the first spatter of rain hit the heat-baked asphalt of the pavements. It had been hot. Not a bright, sunshiny hotness. But a dull, humid hotness that lay over the city, pressing down upon it like a steaming blanket that obscured the sun, but gave no cooling shade.

And now at six the storm clouds, long delayed, broke with a fierce and sudden cannonade that drowned out even the roaring of the city itself.

At the first flash of lightning Rowena Asche sitting listlessly beside the bedroom window jumped and clutched the arms of the chair convulsively. Rain began to pelt down, first in a few huge scattered drops and then in a sudden torrent.

She went around shutting windows, trembling each time the lightning flashed, wishing Cassie were there. She jerked still more violently when the doorbell rang, and then gave a shuddering sigh of relief. That would be Cassie now. Probably forgot her key. She hurried to the door and opened it. At the sight of the two men she stepped back, confused

and disconcerted. Those men from the police again. She felt herself beginning to tremble.

Spike and the Inspector walked in through the door that only two days before they had smashed with the battering ram of their shoulders. The superintendent had made a quick repair job.

"Cassie in?" Spike asked, but pleasantly. Not like that night, Rowena thought.

"No—but I'm expecting her any moment now."

Herschman sniffed the air expectantly and looked disappointed. "I thought she said southern fried chicken and candied sweet potatoes."

"She did, and she better come across or . . ." Spike crossed the living room to the kitchen. "Hey, what the hell?" he said indignantly to Miss Asche.

She looked puzzled.

"We were invited for dinner at six, and it's ten after now, and where's the food and where's Cassie?"

"Why—I don't know. She wasn't here when I got home from the office."

"Was she here when you left this morning?"

"Yes, of course."

"Do you know what time she went out?"

"No. I didn't . . . I wasn't . . ." A look of growing alarm seemed to take hold of her.

"Hold everything," Spike said, "I'm going to investigate this food situation." He went to the icebox, opened it. Butter, half a quart of milk, some tomatoes, a few bits of leftovers. No chicken. He searched through cupboard shelves. Flour, sugar, rice, the ordinary staples of the larder, but no sweet potatoes.

He looked worried.

The Inspector motioned him back into the living room where they were alone. "I told you I should have put a tail on that dame," he remonstrated.

"Oh shut up," Spike said irritably. "Lemme think," and he flung himself down into a chair and lit a nervous cigarette.

When the doorbell rang a second time, they both jumped almost as convulsively as Rowena Asche. "That's her now," Spike said with more relief in his voice than grammar.

But it wasn't. It was Anne Penton, dripping with rain, without umbrella or galoshes, her hat and coat soaking.

"Where's Cassie?" she demanded hurriedly without any of the formalities of greeting.

"You're asking us," Spike said. "Where's Cassie and where's our dinner?"

"Oh, damn your dinner," the girl burst out. "Rowena," she called, "where's Cassie?" and she left the two men alone.

In a few minutes she was back bringing Miss Asche with her.

"Cigarette?" Spike offered her his case. She took one, accepted a light and smoked in short, nervous puffs. She drummed on the table, looked at her watch, finally flung the cigarette away half smoked.

"Anything on your mind?" Spike asked.

"No—yes, I mean I have to see Cassie."

"Would I do instead?"

"I—" The girl's nervous tension was increasing by the moment.

Spike laid a hand not unkindly on her arm. "Better let me know," he said evenly.

She looked at him with eyes that were filled with anxiety. She hesitated for a moment. But there was something reassuring about this strange fellow—even with all he'd done to her.

"It's about Father," she said. "I'm worried."

"Why?"

"I—I can't find him."

"You mean he's disappeared—again?"

"I—I don't know. I—Oh, maybe I'm just being foolish. He was at his house this morning. I talked to him on the telephone about ten o'clock. We were to meet for lunch at Longchamps at one. He didn't show up."

"Maybe he forgot."

"No—I—I don't think so. He knew I'd been to the police station with Cassie yesterday, and he wanted to know . . . I told him we'd meet for lunch and I'd tell him . . ."

"Have you tried to get in touch with him this afternoon?"

"Of course. I've called his apartment almost every hour. And then I went up there myself. I've just come from there. He isn't home."

"You say he knew that you'd been down to Headquarters yesterday?"

"Yes."

"What did he say about that?"

"He was terribly angry when I told him that Cassie had persuaded me."

"Does your father know Cassie?"

"No, but he has heard me speak of her."

"Does he know where she lives?"

"Why—no. I mean I don't know whether he does or not. Why?"

Spike didn't answer. Things were going around in his brain again.

"Why?" she demanded again, this time louder. There was a sudden urgency in her voice—an urgency tinged with a fear that hovered just below the surface. "Why do you ask that?"

"Because—I— Oh my God!" He jumped from his chair, grabbed his hat.

"What's up?" Herschman demanded.

"Come on," Spike shouted over his shoulder. "Fast. Get going." He

was across the room, jerking open the door. "Don't wait for the elevator," he barked at Herschman following close at his heels, and they plunged down the three flights of stairs.

They dashed from the foyer onto the teeming street. The police car was at the curb. Spike jerked open the door and slid under the wheel. "I'll drive. You keep the siren going."

"Where are we going?" Herschman shouted, but the combined roar of the storm, the car, and the shrieking siren drowned him out.

They headed west on Eighty-fifth, crossed Lexington, over to Park, Madison, then Fifth. Thank God the storm had cleared the streets of traffic! Only an occasional courageous taxi . . . ahead a Fifth Avenue bus . . .

They shot across the avenue into the west-bound transverse of the Park. Clear way now. He pressed harder on the accelerator and the car jumped forward. They threw up great wings of water as they roared through an underpass where the rain was hub deep.

"Where are we going?" Herschman shouted again.

"Keep the siren going," Spike shouted back. They were through the Park now, coming out onto Central Park West. Into Eighty-first Street, shooting across Broadway, across West End Avenue. At the Drive, Spike jerked the car into the northbound lane.

And then Herschman knew where they were going.

They slid to a screaming halt in front of the old-fashioned apartment building. Both men were out of the car before it had stopped.

"The superintendent—fast!" Spike snapped at the telephone operator. "Tell him to come to 6B with the keys." He gave her a brief flash of Herschman's badge.

It seemed like an hour, but it was less than two minutes. The super too, was popeyed with excitement, and his keys jingled nervously in his hands as he selected the 6B key.

Spike flung the door open and rushed in, drawing the Inspector with him, slamming the door in the super's face. It was getting dark. A flash of lightning striking down from the Palisades lighted up the living room. No one there.

Spike plunged across the room, jerked open the door to the bedroom. Another flash of lightning, this time a long, crackling one that for three seconds threw the room into brilliant light.

Only three seconds—but three seconds were enough.

"Jesus!" Herschman said. "Jesus Christ Almighty!"

For a moment Spike and the Inspector just stood there, while the storm roared and poured outside, and the brief lightning flashes lit up the final tragic rendezvous.

"Go out to the super," Spike said briefly, and there was a strained, hoarse quality to his voice. "Get flashlights, candles."

Presently Herschman returned with two flashlights and four candles. They lit the candles and placed them on the dresser and the chiffonier, and each took a flashlight.

Spike bent over the body of Felix Penton crumpled on the floor, touched a hand, the forehead. Cold. Had been cold for sometime. He tugged at the stained shirt front and pulled it open. Right through the heart. Good aim.

Herschman, searching the pockets of the suit, drew out a letter. He read it in the light from his flash and handed it over to Spike.

There was no salutation. It just began.

"Whenever you've been in a tight spot someone has got you out of it. You're in the tightest spot of your life now. Come to the address below at twelve o'clock this noon *without fail* and receive proof of the identity of the person who murdered Lina Lee. Let no other engagement stand in your way."

It was signed "The Veiled Woman," and the address below was the address of the Riverside Drive apartment.

Spike rose and approached the bed and flashed his light on the figure that lay there. So quiet, so calm. No disorder of clothes or hair. It was almost as if she were sleeping. The head had turned to one side covering the bullet hole through the temple. And the gun, a bright new shining one this time, still clung to the fingers of the right hand that trailed along the floor.

"Cassie," he said softly. "Good old Cassie! I should have known—when you asked the Inspector too—that—" Something stuck in his throat and he couldn't go on.

Herschman's light caught the white square of an envelope lying on top of the dresser. "It's got your name on it and it's—yeah, it's in the same handwriting as that letter to Penton."

"Yeah," Spike said. "Give it to me." He took the letter and put it in his pocket.

"Aren't you going to read it?"

"Not here—now."

"Say listen," accusingly, "did you know this was going to happen?"

"No, but I should have. When she asked you to dinner as well as me, I should have—guessed."

"Listen, wise guy, suppose we have a talk. Were you holding back anything on me?"

"Yeah. A photograph. You'll find it hidden away on the top shelf of a closet in the men's room at Headquarters. And I wish to God I'd never seen it or you or the damn case or your bloody Police Department. Call 'em up and tell 'em to take charge. I'm through. I'm getting out." And he turned and walked from the apartment. But he didn't slam the door behind him. He closed it gently, quietly as if he had no wish to disturb those who were long since beyond disturbing.

It was the next afternoon before the Inspector saw the younger brother of the district attorney.

"He's asleep," Pug said when Herschman called at the apartment.
"When'd he get in?"

"Some time early this morning."

"I'll wake him." Herschman strode into the bedroom and gave the tousled figure on the bed a firm shake or two.

Spike was heavy-eyed and groggy, but the fierce bitterness of the night before was gone. He just looked tired as all hell, and he admitted as much.

"I didn't like to wake you up," Herschman said, "but I had to."

"Pug, get us a couple of drinks. God, I shipped so much water last night I'll need a gallon of liquor to get it out of my system."

"Where'd you go?"

"Walking. Up to 125th Street and back. It was midnight when I got to the hospital. I had a talk with Bishop."

"What's he got to do with it now?"

"Nothing. It was just as I figured it."

"Figured what?"

"That dame had gotten his father. He was going to get her."

"You mean he planned . . ."

"Not murder. He's not the type."

"Then he was the guy who took a wax impression of that cabinet lock?"

"Yeah. And had a key made. He wanted a look at the books Lina Lee'd been keeping. Only he looked at 'em the wrong night."

"Friday, May 27?"

Spike nodded. "He got 'em out of Penton's office. It was dark, and he didn't know the dame was in there—dead. He wanted to look at 'em over the week end. But complications set in."

"Such as?"

"Anne Penton. When she told him on Monday, she told him everything. Even showed him the letter from Lina Lee's typewriter. Then he knew they were all in a spot. Have you seen her or Rowena since last night?"

"Yeah. I gathered up a few loose ends myself."

"You mean Rowena?"

"Yeah. She was at Penton Press Friday night, May 27."

"Sure. Why'd she lie?"

"Scared, I suppose. She went down around midnight. She'd made up her mind to have a look at the books, too."

"How'd she think she was going to manage with them locked up?"

"She didn't know. People, particularly dames that have been brooding over personal grievances for a long time, get sort of nuts. She's the one that took a bulb from one of the lamps in the outer

office and put it in the lamp in Penton's office. When she turned it on she saw the woman dead, and she beat it."

"Poor old thing," Spike nodded compassionately.

There was a little silence. Then Herschman spoke. "What I want to know is how you figured it out, smart guy?"

"But not smart enough," Spike said ruefully. "If I'd been dumber I wouldn't have caught on to Cassie at all. And if I'd been smarter I'd have caught on soon enough to save her."

"Save her?" Herschman was shocked.

"Sure. I'd have double-crossed you and fixed it up for her to make a nice little getaway."

"Why you—"

"Stow it, Inspector. I've met one or two swell murderers in my day and Cassie was the best of the lot."

"But what made you suspect her? There wasn't a thing I could see . . ."

"Me neither. I didn't know from nothing for a long time. I think it was the purple onion that originally got me started on the right track."

"You mean the one we found in Lina Lee's apartment?"

"Yeah. So completely incongruous. A lowly onion in that kind of swanky boudoir. It didn't make sense. Unless, of course, you can wring sense out of incongruity. I think that onion must have stewed around in my subconscious mind for a long time. And then I began to remember a little bit here, a little there. A remark Cassie let fall that first morning when she had Pug and me at breakfast in her apartment. 'I was raised on a farm and I do like to see 'men eat.' And then later when Prendergast was telling me about the time some woman got Felix Penton off a court-martial death sentence, he said she had a 'kind of fresh-off-the-farm look.'"

"Pretty slim figuring," Herschman put in.

"Sure. But that wasn't all. When Penton first tried to sell us the veiled woman story, we thought he was nuts. Then we began to believe him. Naturally Rowena Asche seemed to fill the bill—the only woman in the case who did. And then Cassie, dear old gabby Cassie, trying her damnedest to protect Rowena, trying to keep us from even talking to Rowena, says, 'Now there isn't a thing Rowena knows I don't know, if it's information about the Penton Press you're after. We've lived together for years, and she's told me everything.'"

"Still pretty slim figuring."

"Yeah, that's what I decided myself until the day we searched the Riverside Drive apartment. I held out on you then, Inspector."

"Held out what?"

"A photograph I found in the top drawer of the dresser. It was the original of the picture that appeared in the paper in 1913 of Felix

Penton and Cecile LaMotte. It was a lot larger and a lot plainer than a newspaper half tone. When I got it back to Headquarters I took it to the most private spot in the building and had a look under a magnifying glass. Marie Cecile LaMotte was interesting. Particularly in one spot."

"What spot? And stop talking about spots. I'm beginning to get 'em before the eyes."

"Call it a patch then, the kind they used in the eighteenth century. At first glance it didn't look so much like a patch as it looked like a little black mole—right above the left-hand corner of the mouth. And that precisely is where Cassie Framp had a little black mole. When I got back to your office, there were Cassie and Anne Penton. So I tried something. A psychological experiment, maybe you'd call it."

Spike paused and lighted another cigarette.

"Go on, go on," Herschman said impatiently, "and don't go high hat with your psychological experiments. What did you do?"

"Just something simple. I took the purple onion and played with it—and watched Cassie while I was doing it. And she watched me. And then I was pretty sure. That onion, you see, was sort of symbolic—that onion and its incongruity."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, here was murder. A crime o' passion, as Freddie Bingley would say. And how! A *grande passion!* A passion of a lifetime of a woman for a man. Now did you ever see anyone who looked less like the harborer of a *grande passion* than Cassie Framp?"

"Well no, she wasn't hardly the type."

"And the onion was so in character. Cassie had another *grande passion*. Cooking. How like her utterly incongruous self to pick up a sack of onions from a pushcart—on her way to a murder. Incidentally last night when we were searching through her pantry ostensibly for fried chicken and sweet potatoes, I had my eyes out for a sack of purple onions. And they were there all right. Half used."

There was another short silence between them, and again it was Herschman who spoke first. "But why—I mean what was her motive? It still doesn't make sense."

Spike took a long drink before he answered. "But this," he said slowly, "does." And he handed over to Inspector Herschman a square white envelope that he took from his crumpled, rain-soaked coat.

The Inspector unfolded the pages. The handwriting was loose and sprawling, but easy to read.

Dear Spike—I'm not going into a long song and dance about a lot of things you already know. When you find out for sure that I killed Lina Lee, you do one of two things. You either go tell the Inspector, and the Police Department shoots the works with me at the wrong end of the shooting. Or else you don't. And from what I know of you, I wouldn't be surprised if you didn't. You're

just that kind of a crazy guy. Maybe that's why I like you.

I'm not checking out because you've caught up with me. I'm checking out because I've caught up with myself. At last I've faced the fact that Felix Penton isn't worth the powder to blow him to hell—let alone the lifetime of love I've given him.

I gave him a lifetime. He gave me just two years. Two years of Heaven it was, but the rate of exchange is too high. I was just a fresh, dumb young farm girl once, and then I ran away from home with a traveling show. I changed my name from Cassie Lucas to Cecile LaMotte because I thought it sounded classier. Well, it was, for the chorus job I got in New York.

And then I met Felix Penton. I was crazy in love with him. He was fond enough of me to rent an apartment where we could be together, and he gave me a swell emerald necklace and earrings.

Well anyway, Felix Penton played around with me for two years. And then one day I read in the papers that he was engaged to be married to some Social Register girl. He'd given her my emerald necklace and earrings for a present. He'd taken them a few days before and said he was going to have them cleaned.

I sat in the apartment for two days waiting for him. And he never came. I read everything I could find in the newspapers about him. When I knew he was going to France during the war, I got a job with a bunch of entertainers and went over too. I just wanted to be near him, so once in a while I could see him, and if he got into any trouble maybe I could help.

Well, he got into trouble all right. He got court-martialed and they were going to shoot him. I heard the whole thing sitting back in the corner of a half-wrecked city hall all done up in a black veil so no one would know me. But I got him off. I had to sleep with a big, beefy brute of a colonel to do it, but I got him off.

When he came back to the States, I came too. I was getting a bit old for show business, so I changed my name back to Cassie Lucas and took to waiting on tables. I met a man about twice my age with money, one foot in the grave, and a yen to marry me. Old Bill Framp. I'd managed to get acquainted with Felix Penton's private secretary, and we had an apartment together. She was in love with him too, poor girl, always had been. In that way I was able to keep a line on Felix Penton.

I knew when he was in a jam in the Bascomb & Rogers business in 1929. I married old Bill Framp so's I could get \$45,000 cash to hand over to Felix Penton. I didn't want him to know where it came from, so I just fixed myself up all in a black dress and veil and went out and handed him the stuff in the street.

Well, that's the way I lived for years—on the few second-hand crumbs I could get from Rowena and from Anne. Old Bill Framp died and left me pretty nicely fixed, and he never even knew he'd been cheated.

Then this girl, Lina Lee, came along, and from then on I knew there was trouble ahead. And there was. I knew all about him and her. I knew all about Mrs. Bridenthal. And then I found out that the emerald necklace he'd once given me, and then his wife, and then promised his daughter, he'd given to her. And Anne's twenty-first birthday was coming around.

I wasn't going to have Anne hurt. By this time I'd got to love her myself. I knew if she didn't get the emeralds on her twenty-first birthday she'd be mortally hurt. Especially when she found out where they were.

Anne's birthday was on Monday. On Friday afternoon I went down to the Penton Press. I didn't have a clear idea of just what I was going to do, but I did have a gun. An old one I'd got from a soldier in France in 1918. I decided that if I couldn't talk Lina Lee out of those emeralds, I'd stage a hold-up. Yes, I know I'm simple. But folks that are raised on a farm usually are. I wore that old black getup because I didn't want anyone to recognize me. I went into the office and there wasn't anyone there except her. I could hear her telephoning. She was talk-

ing to Felix, telling him he had to get \$50,000 by Monday and turn it over to her or she'd spill the works. Said she'd tell Mr. Bridenthal the whole story.

I was kind of stunned at first. I didn't know it had got to this—blackmail. And so I just sat there, thinking. She called the super about an electric light bulb and an office boy came in with a chocolate malted and went away, and by that time I'd made up my mind. I was willing to stage a hold-up if I had to for Anne. I was willing to commit murder for Felix Penton.

And so I did. I just went in and shot her. I searched her bag and took her keys and went down to her apartment house and got the emeralds. I couldn't find the earrings, but I got the necklace. And then—when I wasn't noticing, I suppose—I went and dropped that little purple-skinned onion out of the sack I was carrying.

Well, the next morning I called up Felix Penton and had him come out and walk along the Park, and I got into my old black rig again and went and handed him the emerald necklace. I thought everything was going to be simple. But it didn't turn out that way—Anne being around there and Stanley Bishop and Rowena, and Felix running away. That was just like him. He didn't know his secretary was dead. He thought there was going to be hell to pay on Monday, so he just ran away.

I guess that just about covers it. You know everything else. I could tell you did, by the way you looked at me yesterday morning when I was with Anne in your office and you were playing with that little purple onion. So I'll be leaving you. Only when I leave I'll be taking Felix Penton along with me. I've been blind all my life, but these last two or three weeks have opened my eyes. I've thrown away a lifetime of love on a man that wouldn't hesitate to sell his own daughter and her happiness down the river. Who deliberately turned suspicion on poor, faithful Rowena when he thought things were getting too hot for him. I kind of admire Lina Lee. She was the only one who didn't fall for him.

I've invited him to come up and see me, and he'll be here any minute now. God, what an awful fool I've been all these years. Keeping up this tomb, just because once upon a time . . . Tomb's a good word. That's what it will be. Tell Rowena that underneath my handkerchief box in the top bureau drawer there's a will. She'll get what I've got; that ought to keep her pretty comfortable. Tell Anne the truth, so that all her love and loyalty will go to Stan and none of it will be wasted on grieving for someone who wasn't worth it. Sorry you and the Inspector missed your dinner. Some day we'll have pie in the sky together. Love
—Cassie.

Inspector Herschman laid the letter down quietly. He rose and walked to the window and looked down into the street, hands thrust deep into his pockets. For a while he didn't say anything. Just stood there looking. Then the words came—slowly, almost hesitantly.

"You know—I kind of wish myself you'd been a little smarter—and double-crossed me."

* * *

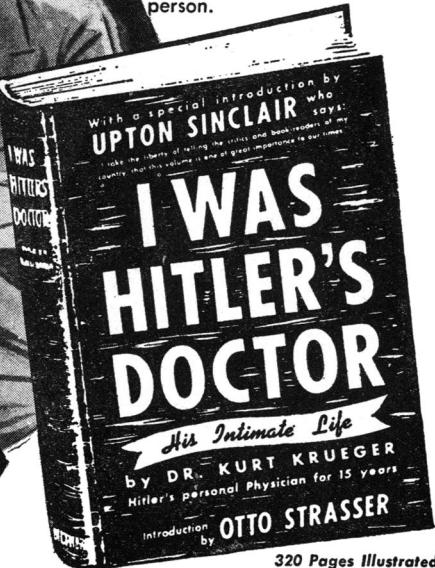
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